Towards an epistemology of social work – lessons from the European history of an uncertain discipline

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the dynamic relations with the various social, cultural and political contexts which characterise social work as a profession and as an academic discipline. The renewed intensification of international contacts and exchanges in Europe, promoted by the various networks which ECCE helped to establish, demonstrates the benefits of recognising the specificity of social work's epistemology as being embedded in these tensions. This perspective offers the possibility of engaging more critically with both the social policies that seek to instrumentalise social work and to affirm the academic autonomy of the various disciplines in which social work gets framed as a means of challenging the restrictive positivism of the current dictate of "evidence".

The activities of ECCE, the European Centre for Community Education, ostensibly centred on promoting European dimensions in the training and practice of social work. In pursuing this aim it however made a much more fundamental contribution to the puzzling question of how, given the enormous diversity of approaches to social work theory and practice one discovers in European exchanges, an epistemological basis for treating it as a serious academic discipline can be found and developed without imposing a 'standard model' on the historically grounded differences. The following reflections arise very directly from the experiences and insights that shaped my academic and professional views on social work on account of my

involvement with ECCE and hence on account of the stimulating exchanges with its founder, Friedrich Seibel. They will centre on three intricately connected questions:

- What is the subject matter of social work
- What justifies the place of social work in academia
- What benefits do users of social services derive from social workers being educated at academic level.

With regard to the first question, social work has been struggling since its beginnings with defining its subject area. Every student of social work in every country where social work is taught is confronted with the somewhat embarrassing dilemma that in contrast to other academic disciplines no easy answer is available to the question, 'what subject do you actually study'. And when we attempt to define our subject matter, we are immediately embroiled in boundary questions to the effect that what we claim as our territory is already occupied by other disciplines such as psychology and sociology.

Conventionally the subject of social work has been defined at three levels:

a) 'The subject of social work are human beings in difficult relationships'. While the various forms of human behaviour are the uncontested terrain of psychology, we can say that the specificity of social work lies in the relationship dimension of human behaviour. Or more specifically, and this is an astonishing historical observation, the interest of social work in this subject matter combined always a view on the problems that arise in human relationships with the attention to the coping abilities of people to resolve their relationship problems themselves. This is a first hint with regard to the troublesome question of our relationship with other professions and particularly with the profession of psychology, because when our expertise is defined not by the 'compensatory' ability to achieve changes in behaviour that people themselves cannot manage, but by the supportive ability, to foster the self-help capacities of clients, this may reflect detrimentally on our professional importance (if not

competence). It is from this central practiceconcern, or from this epistemological principle (which, as can be seen, already contains a value perspective) that different psychological frameworks were and can be examined that help to elucidate this subject matter and construct the specific knowledge framework. This also explains the fact that historically social work showed a preference for particular psychological frameworks, usually not behaviourism, where behavioural change is framed in a rather mechanical way, but specifically psychoanalysis. Freud's pioneering scientific system not only extended the logic of scientific enquiry into the domain of the unconscious, it above all established the centrality of the agency of the ego as key to any behavioural change, moreover an ego which is fundamentally shaped by interactions with others. This accounts for the phenomenal importance that psychoanalytic concepts assumed in the history of social work, particularly for the model of case work. It served not only to explain the complexity of the helping relationship, it also gave the principle of the priority of self-help a scientific grounding. Social work later on sought also to exploit similar conceptual opportunities of cognitive psychology where changes in behaviour are also related back to the mental constructs which individuals themselves have to tackle.

b) The perspective described so far, the typical case work perspective, received a fundamental challenge early on from the community work perspective which prioritises the public dimension of human behaviour. What emerged as a focus of research and specialisation relatively late in psychology, the branch of social psychology, constituted a key element of certain strands of social work right from the beginning in the 19th century: the settlement movement based itself not only on a strategy, but on an epistemology of self-help as the utilisation of collective capacities, the positive validation of 'coping' that exists particularly in communities under pressure. This concern obviously led to searches for sociological explanations of interactive behaviour, to the establishment of 'social laws' for instance in relation to the incidence of poverty (see the pioneering surveys by Rowntree and Booth in England and the movement of the Fabian Society, Barker, 1984) which established that poverty had a

structural cause and not a psychological, and had to be tackled therefore structurally through reforms rather than through counselling and therapy at individual level. Similar surveys in the 1930s and 50s made the field of delinquency accessible to scientific enquiry and consequently to intervention programmes on a community basis: particularly youth crime was found to correspond to structural factors in society rather than to psychological pathology in certain young people. A related framework was provided by the rise of system theory in the post-war era which found interest in social work again on account of its emphasis on self-organisation and collective agency, although the areas of application were normally confined to family and group contexts.

c) Many of the epistemological strands in community work interlace with considerations concerning the fundamental question of the impact of society on the behaviour of individuals. In this regard the particular subject area of social work becomes nothing less than 'the social' itself, or, as it is framed particularly in the German discourses of the 19th century, the 'social question', meaning the political concern over a threatening disintegration of society in the light of the fundamental revolutions which more or less abolished the old social order: the cultural revolution of the enlightenment, the industrial revolution and finally the political revolutions which transformed the nature of the state according to the principles of democracy. All these revolutions have in common that they constitute the individual's autonomy and sovereignty politically and beg therefore the question which laws govern the existence of social order. The Durkheimian insight of a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is lastly not just of sociological interest but has above all political consequences. Societies, or rather governments had to actively and deliberately concern themselves with the creation of social solidarity. Consequently the behaviour of individuals as members of society assumes a political dimension, is influenced by political choices and contributes at the same time to the shaping of politics. Social work in this perspective is exercised in social policy measures. Interestingly, this epistemology found only occasionally acceptance in social work discourses, at least at the time when social work began to professionalise. Political action, based on political

insights and analysis, were largely the domain of professionals and activists who not only had nothing to do with social work but who actually opposed and criticised the approach of social work as an impediment to fundamental political change. Occasionally the call for a grounding of social work practice in political theory was raised (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Corrigan & Leonard, 1978), as in the models of radical social work or of community action, but their epistemology remained a minority phenomenon.

An overview of these broad theoretical frameworks with which the subject area of social work can be defined, is incomplete, however, if presented as a neat and harmonious side-by-side of options, as if the choice was arbitrary and neutral, a matter for the individual taste of the professional-as-theoretician. I want to propose instead that seen from a meta-level of historical and particularly of political analysis, epistemology in social work of necessity interacts with politics. This observation, yet to be illustrated, once more can give rise to a negative image of social work as a profession unable to ground itself in independent academic discourses. But this connection can be seen, on the contrary, as the starting point for a very particular approach to epistemology itself.

For the epistemological options with which to frame not just the timeless relationship patterns of human beings in general, but these patterns under the conditions of a socially and politically driven re-ordering of 'the social' need to be analysed against the background of the political choices which characterised the European nation states.

According to the well-known welfare regime typology of Esping-Andersen (1990) three basic choices characterise not just the welfare systems of European states, but the fundamental approaches to social solidarity and social integration, choices which are also reflected in the overall pattern of political party positions which – at least until the last decades – characterised the political landscape of Europe. There is the liberal model, which places emphasis on the individual as self-responsible agent grounded in guarantees

of freedom which the state has to respect by keeping a long distance from individuals. Then there is the social democratic position which by contrast sees in the state the embodiment of the collective will of citizens and the guarantor of equality. It therefore attributes to the state readily all major public and hence also all major welfare functions. And in between there developed the conservative position which entrusts the responsibility for integration and well-being to the institutions of civil society, like the family, the association, the churches – carriers of cultural values and traditions in which corporate groups of people find their identity.

Now it is obviously true that all levels at which social work operates conceptually and professionally are to be found in all European countries. But it is interesting to speculate that the development of the corresponding epistemologies was not unaffected by the social policy context of the different European 'welfare regimes' and that there exists a certain affinity between a particular conceptual frame of social work and a particular political approach to social integration and solidarity.

political orientation	conceptual orientation
liberalism	individual responsibility
social democracy	public commitment / rights
conservatism	community autonomy / subsidiarity

Turned another way, it can be said that while all theoretical models of social work can be found in the various welfare regime contexts of Europe, each regime gives them a particular 'spin', thereby setting up path dependencies in the transmission of practice traditions which emphasise or de-emphasise certain aspects – and thereby in turn contribute to the stability of welfare traditions.
Liberalism for instance has a particular affinity to social case work in the sense that it emphasises the responsibility of the individual for improving his or her situation. Within this ideological framework there is a tendency to instrumentalise self-help as an obligation, a means of exerting pressure on people, either through the mechanism of stigma or via the conditions attached

to the helping process as a threat that looms in the background, for instance the withdrawal of welfare payments.

By contrast, social casework in the context of social policies in Nordic countries, which emphasise rights and entitlements as the basis of an equal treatment of citizens, maintains that self-help requires the provision of a sufficient material basis as part of public welfare provisions.

The ambiguity that attaches to a particular theoretical approach taken in isolation can best be illustrated by the considerable variations in the meaning that social pedagogy as a theory has assumed in different countries. In Nordic countries it tends to be relegated to the area of residential care or work with children and young people, areas where special educational skills are required to initiate a specific learning process that extends beyond the institution of the school. As such it is generally considered auxiliary to a social science based social work approach. Social science in Nordic countries has the status of the theoretical basis from which social democratic regimes approach the task of 'bringing social order' and thereby solidarity to an otherwise divided society. It is particularly interesting to note that the UK is currently very keen to import social pedagogical concepts as a theoretical basis for a field which has – like many services under liberalism! – grown pragmatically and hence with scant reference to a coherenttheoretical framework. There is now a politically motivated drive to shape the care sector from such a theory base as a means of lending it higher professional and academic status (see the initiative by the Thomas Coram research unit in London, Cameron, McQuail & Petrie, 2007; Cameron & Moss, 2011). But the transfer of theories does not automatically mean the transfer of the social policy conditions for their strategic implementation. The particular character of the German version of social pedagogy is, that it developed within the context of Bismarckian social policies which are grounded in the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. the notion that the state must not assume responsibilities which devolved institutions, such as local authorities and particularly institution of civil society like churches and associations, are able to carry out. Only when their efforts do not suffice can the appropriate higher level of organisation be invoked. Social

pedagogy in the German version meshes intricatelywith this social policy concept because it acknowledges that 'learning' is an everyday, lifelong process which happens collectively in a myriad of contexts thereby creating and sustaining communities. This community dimension of the educational process as a shared responsibility (contained in the untranslatable German term Bildung), either in the conservative sense brings about a continuity of values and identities, or – more rarely – in the progressive sense harnesses innovation and transformation quite outside the pathways laid down by governmental policies and often in opposition to them (cf. Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', 1996).

The principles and also the constitutive theories of social work can therefore be said to be embedded not only in societal practices, as is the case where they describe an element of emancipatory, autonomous action, but also in dominant social policy trends which each modern state espouses. The search for the subject matter of social work and in correspondence for an appropriate epistemology must therefore not conclude with the identification of interventive methods per se, rather it must proceed to include the analysis of the relationship between these methods and the contingent, historically grown and politically shaped national contexts.

But this is now where the second question needs to be raised: What justifies the place of social work in academia?

If placed in training institutions outside academia the danger for social work is always that it becomes unwittingly incorporated into the national welfare agenda, that it turns into the executor of the prevailing social policy frame-work, its more or less willing and competent servant. Let me emphasise straight away that simply placing social work training at the university level is no guarantee against the same mechanism coming into operation there, and that developing reflective practice concepts based on research is not the prerogative of universities but can also take place in non-university institutions.

But at least in the academic context of the university the process of theory generation is exposed to the precepts of academic teaching and research, which are guided ultimately by the standards of scientific analysis and open critique. Social work understood as an academic discipline, irrespective of the way it defines its subject matter, gets therefore confronted with an examination of its theoretical basis. It needs to address the question, what allows us to know and on what basis can we accept a theory to be true.

Social work thereby confirms its particular place in the post-enlightenment era and shares in the fundamental debates of modern sciences which have to account for the validity of the knowledge they generate. Across various disciplines we can distinguish two fundamental approaches which, despite all the additional differentiations, have emerged roughly over the last 300 years.

One is the natural science paradigm aimed at establishing facts and reliable regularities in the form of 'laws' which together constitute objectivity. This paradigm celebrated its triumphs in the field of science and technology, replacing belief in the authority of dogma with reliance on experimentally established evidence through the application of rational principles. Thus mathematical laws of nature were established, accurate predictions about the behaviour of objects became possible, laws of physics could be harnessed to extract energy from new sources and apply it efficiently in the interest of saving manual labour and thereby enhancing 'civilization'. But this quest was not confined to the field of natural sciences, the discipline of sociology which became established in the 19th century, also owes its existence to the transfer of this paradigm, the paradigm of positivism, to the subject matter of society. Emile Durkheim in particular deliberately spoke of 'social facts' and sought to establish 'laws of society' (Durkheim, 1964), for instance with his famous statistical work on incidents of suicide which he related to the phenomenon of 'anomie', radical changes in the value structure of societies (Durkheim, 1997). Karl Marx in at least some of his writings analysed economic processes in this perspective with the intention of arriving at laws of social transformations in the form of revolutions which were to occur inevitably.

But it is also within sociology where strong resistance against this positivist view of the social world emerged under the banner of 'Verstehende Soziologie' or phenomenology, picking up on the paradigm of hermeneutics developed in the human sciences and specifically in historical research, literary criticism and theology: Here the emphasis is on subjectivity, or rather on the quest for understanding meaning which manifests itself in human action and which cannot be properly understood from an objective distancebut only from an inter-subjective engagement with actors. Max Weber's sociology constitutes this attempt at valuing the nature of human action from the perspective of such sets of meaning which can also have a predictive value but which recognises the unique generativity of human agency rather than its determinacy by external factors (Ringer, 2000). This led to the development of distinct research methods aimed at capturing 'meanings', mainly qualitative research methods in a line of development from Weber to Schütz (1962), Berger and Luckman (1966), Goffman (1969) and Bourdieu (1992), that correspond to a view of the social world as a historical and cultural construct.In this view, person and world are intrinsically related through the lived experience of this world.

It is interesting to see which other academic disciplines joined this controversy and with what kind of consequences. Psychology for instance is still characterised by such afundamental divide, at least as far as therapeutic psychology is concerned in a hereditary line going back to Freud and his insistence on the ultimate subjectivity of the meaning of human behaviour, even where its unconscious motivations can be determined with a degree of regularity and hence objectivity (Elliott, 2005).

The observation that scientific enquiry into complex human matters leads not so much to unequivocal clarity and universal consensus but to constant controversy and disunity may make it appear additionally futile to expose a discipline like social work to such procedures, and indeed many see in the 'academisation' of social work a hindrance to the prospect of improved practice. But it can be argued that only by exposing our knowledge and particularly our ways of establishing knowledge to such elaborate scrutiny

can we do justice to the enormous challenges that the practice reality of social work confronts us with. Having critically examined our epistemology is a necessary precondition for responsible practice even if shortcuts appear more efficient or at least convenient.

This hypothesis now needs to be examined in answer to my third question. What benefits do users of social services derive from social workers being educated at academic level?

We can approach this subject by considering the all but 'neutral' effect of theoretical constructs in particular political contexts to find that there is generally no linear, mono-directional pathway of transmission of theories into practice. This would confirm the role of universities as relays where impulses from both sides and in both directions meet and get negotiated.

This can be illustrated with one of the earliest frameworks devised to give social work interventions a scientific grounding, the concept of 'social diagnosis' devised by Mary Richmond (1917) and taken up, with significant modifications, by Alice Salomon in 1926. Clearly the framework for this proposal tried to emulate a key instrument of the discipline and profession of medicine, that of diagnosis, with the implicit message that by examining all the 'facts' of a client's difficult situation one can arrive at proposals for change which take as many of those factors into account. This is ostensibly a positivist project in which importance is given to the accuracy of observation and the causal connection between observed facts. If child neglect is seen in the context of poverty and poverty resulted from unemployment then improving the job prospects of a negligent parent might have positive effects on the child's wellbeing.
Yet in the actual elaboration of the concept by Richmond and Salomon the positivism assumes a specific purpose in as much as it is applied from the perspective of the client. The validation of the 'facts' is a matter of negotiation at the micro-level of the professional interaction and therefore incorporates an inter-subjective approach that takes the life-world of clients into account.

The choice between objectivising and subjectivising approaches therefore cannot be settled at the epistemological level alone but inevitably assumes an ethical character. The choices that have to be made in this regard involve value positions and making them requires a particular kind of competence, a professional competence which cannot be separated from the actual methodological competence. And precisely this connection between 'technical' and ethical competence has become obscured or even disrupted by
a worrisome disjuncture atthe level of theory formation corresponding to societal changes and their representation in politics.

The disjuncture concerns the extreme polarisation between the objectivising and the subjectivising traditions in epistemology. As far as the latter is concerned we have witnessed over the past two or three decades a kind of radicalisation of subjectivity in the philosophical form of post-structuralism and sociologically in that of post-modernism. Taking up the critique of meta-physics by Nietzsche, post-structuralists like Feyerabend and Derrida (1978) have extended this radical questioning of established certainties as mere 'narratives' and turned it into a coherent method of de-construction.'Neither science nor rationality are universal measures of excellence. They are partic-ular traditions, unaware of their historical grounding' (Feyerabend, 1993, p. 7). All claims of 'authoritative truth' can be unmasked as attempts at gaining dominance and power with what the process of questioning and deconstruction reveals as subjective and hence relative viewpoints. There is no way of gaining firm ground objectively beyond this relativity and the regress of questioning and de-constructing is infinite.

The approach appears to find its confirmation in the cultural aspects of glob-alisation which, facilitated by the spread of electronic media, demonstrate the relativity of value positions as mere subjective opinions by conveying a myriad of lifestyle options to virtually every corner of the world. The quest for justification, contained in the question 'why?', gives way to the relativising counter-question 'why not?' in matters as disparate as inventing new stock market products that have no clear connection to any tangible product any

longer to women having children at the age of 56 (as was the case with the Italian singer Gianna Nannini).

The condition for all these endless choices is of course that they are conditional on being 'technically possible', and this touches the other side of the divide: under this protective ideological umbrella of value indifference or rather with the assistance of this splitting device of calling for radical subjectivity, objectivity climbs to new heights. Spearheaded in the field of medicine, methods of cure and intervention are no longer organised and examined within particular therapeutic traditions and schools but are subjected simply to the verdict of 'what works'. Factual evidence drives and determines the development of new cures and new medicines. This model of 'Evidence Based Practice' (EBP), has long reached also social work and overshadows our epistemological discourses (Lorenz, 2012).

Before briefly entering into the debate over the value of EBP for social work we have to once more consider the scientific aspects in the context of the social and political transformation processes that surround it. To consider this link is vital for any assessment of academic and professional merits as it impacts on the 'spin' the theoretical aspects assume in practice.

At the societal level, it has to be born in mind that the split objectivity / subjectivity is accompanied by the trend termed by Ulrich Beck (1992) towards a 'risk society' or rather the desire to life risk free lives and, since this is not possible, to 'calculate risk'. From weather forecasts, which nowadays are incomplete if they do not include a reference to the percentage risk of rain or snow on a particular day or at a particular hour, to the complex questions concerning the 'risk' to children of living with their (potentially abusive) carers, we are surrounded by such predictions which are all aimed at reducing uncertainty measurably and hence of introducing an objectifying mathematical calculus into all aspects of physical and social life.

This trend connects intricately with the advancement of economic thinking in areas outside the economy, particularly in areas of local administration and in

the provision of public services. Under the title of New Public Management the type of rationality represented by bureaucracy (Adams, 2000), is given a further twist through the introduction of an economic calculus which ultimately lets market mechanisms decide on the allocation of priorities and replaces the political form of democratic governance, deemed inefficient and wasteful, with an economistic form of governance.

Both trends finally are ideologically sanctioned by the politics of neoliberalism and the subsequent reduction of state functions wherever possible and their replacement with private market enterprises, resulting in a global re-education process which seeks to install the individual and his or her rational economic choices as the sovereign will and driving force. Rational homo economicus becomes the paradigm of the 'institution' of post-modern society charged with the responsibility for bringing about social integration paradoxically through a heightened emphasis on self-interest and individualism played out in the market place.

These societal and political changes have had a profound impact on the nature and orientation of theory formation in social work and through this also on service delivery models. While the degree to which social work recently came under criticism for incompetence varied from country to country, mainly over misjudgements in the area of child protection, the split between objectivity and subjectivity, the uncertainties resulting from it and the growth of regulations replacing comprehensive explanatory frameworks derived from theoretical standpoints have been noticed in all countries. As Nigel Parton and Stuart Kirk so aptly diagnose:

> Coherent causal accounts which attempt to provide a picture of the subject in their social context have become of declining importance, for the key purpose of the social worker is increasingly to classify clients for the purpose of judging the nature and level of risk and for allocating resources. The emphasis on the professional worker/client relationship – previously the central feature of social work practice – is being stripped of its social, cultural and professional significance. Knowledge for practice is relevant only in so far as it aids the gathering, assessing, monitoring and

exchange of information and is closely related to the central role now given to managers in most agencies. (Parton & Kirk, 2010, p. 33)

The split between objectifying and interpretative, constructivist approaches meanwhile runs through all academic subject areas and disciplines. The most famous example in physics is perhaps Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in Quantum mechanics. But while this example is often cited, this is of no help and no practical use to social work when taking position to the split that concerns this discipline more directly and urgently. Research – and research based professional training – must assume the character of not just noticing the variety of theoretical approaches (and then leaving it to practitioners to sort out the value and relevance of one or the other); it must find a 'meta-method' that goes beyond relativity if practice is not to become paralysed by all the theoretical options or driven by the seeming objectivity of short-term results.

This is now the central purpose of placing social work into an academic context: Only the unsettling exposure to the threat of absolute relativity of all knowledge and of all value positions can prepare for accountable practice. Academic discourse must examine the 'circumstances' in which evidence is being collected, including the political context as it impacts on the process of theory formation, at the same time as it widens the perspective to relate the emerging evidence to the actual life experience of clients. This is an extremely complex task and needs both space and detachment in order to fathom the depth of this complexity, and engagement with society where the theoretical questions find their political equivalents. Academic scrutiny, and epistemological responsibility, cannot be content with simply stating the variety of positions that can be taken, nor can it simply place itself in one or the other of these 'camps' without questioning such a choice critically. There is indeed merit in both the objectivist view of social reality and in the subjectivist scepticism concerning this project. A 'social worker as researcher' must seek to penetrate the divide to arrive at 'situational' conclusions, situational not so much in relation to the person or user group to whom the research findings are supposed to relate; this differentiation is only one side of the 'it depends'

attitude. Much more important is the critical situational analysis of the political situation that lies behind a particular use of epistemology.

Concurrently this can be observed most dramatically and clearly in the clamour surrounding EBP. In one sense the demand that social workers should make better, wider and more explicit use of research findings in planning their interventions is perfectly justified. Too often bad, i.e. unaccountable practice was hiding behind the 'excuse' of following a particular 'school of theory' where the validity of the theory, rather than its effect on practice, was taken as the key justification for the appropriateness of the intervention. But the exhortation to use evidence from research in practice then needs to be followed by a critical examination of what counts as evidence and particularly what interests lie behind the drive to use a particular kind of evidence (Otto, Polutta & Ziegler, 2009).

Here economic considerations play a crucial role, as EBP is frequently embedded in a management approach aimed at saving expenditure with the use of cost-cutting methods. At the same time, economic considerations have frequently been left out entirely in the examinations of different intervention options by social workers, leading to the accusation that they are naïve and idealistic in their approach to practice. But when economics are to be factored into the equation, then 'realistic' calculations need to be made distinguishing for instance short and long term effects (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010). Short term intervention by means of residential care for a child at risk of abuse might be appropriate but long term effects of being deprived of attachment figures might be equally or even more damaging to a child's emotional development. In these considerations, the subjectivity of 'the client perspective', the meaning of crises and problems in terms of their values and perceptions, need to be combined with the objectivity of empirical regularities, such as the 'facts' about the importance of bonding in developmental psychology and the 'facts' about links between poverty and certain forms of mental and physical illness. As Wachterhouser (2002) proposed, we can still, develop, apply, and retest criteria of knowledge that give us enough reliable evidence or rational assurance to claim in multiple cases that we in fact know some-

thing and do not just surmise or opine that it is the case" (p. 71). Every research approach makes specific assumptions about the nature of reality under investigation (ontology) and about the nature of knowledge (epistemology).

To conclude therefore: social work has not only the right to a place in academia, but the subject matter of social work, the creation of conditions under which social solidarity and integration can be practised in modern societies, by necessity requires the institution of systematic reflexive processes that are the traditional, though not exclusive, prerogative of academia. One could go even further and say, social work is a subject for university-based research and teaching with paradigmatic potential because of its very nature as an inter-disciplinary subject that challenges the university to make use of its inter-disciplinary nature and of its bridging and mediating function between abstract theoretical knowledge and accountable professional practice. Such a programme could be oriented towards the following parameters:

1. the search for truth by means of a radical, reflexive critique of the foundations of knowledge themselves;
2. the recognition of the grounding of all knowledge in lifeworld processes;
3. the necessity of linking knowledge production to ethical considerations;
4. an understanding of the politics and power interests underlying the quest for knowledge;
5. the hermeneutic competence of relating knowledge to language at every stage of investigating reality and communicating the results.

This last concern relates in a very particular way to the core business of social work. To quote Parton and Kirk once more:

'Whether research is qualitative, quantitative or mixed-method in approach, the key issues relate to epistemological concerns and the priority to give voice to those who would otherwise be silent' (Parton & Kirk, 2010, p. 35).

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