

Editorial: How to define social work research?

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The aim of the Journal of Comparative Social Work is to publish comparative research of high quality on subjects important to social work. Comparative research includes both cross-national comparative studies and studies comparing groups, systems or institutions in a single country. The journal even accepts papers reporting on single site studies that can be repeated in different geographical or cultural settings. Hence, the journal aims at forming a vital arena for the dissemination of empirical research and theoretical arguments about *issues central to social work* across national and cultural borders.

The pertinent question, then, is what are the central issues of social work? What should be regarded as the prime topics for social work research? As a commentary to their own definition of social work, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) states that “*Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve*”.¹ This ambitious mandate requires a critical and comprehensive understanding of the complex relations between individuals and their environments, where environments include both families, communities and the society at large. But it also requires a critical understanding of the way in which social problems, or dysfunctions, are defined, produced, shaped and met within social and cultural contexts.

To create and maintain the capability of social work to act in accordance with its mandate a variety of research is needed. For analytical purposes we can distinguish between a micro, a meso and a macro level of research. Micro level concerns individuals, inter-personal relations and small groups such as families and close networks. Examples of relevant micro-level research include studies of face-to-face interaction, in families or peer groups, or between social workers and beneficiaries, or research that reflects how individuals describe and attach meaning to everyday experiences or challenges. We probably need a renaissance for research in which social deprivation and challenges are reflected from the perspective of persons with first hand experiences, extending the *concerning glance* (Henningsen & Gotaas 2008) that easily follows a social work perspective.

Meso level most often refer to the organizational level or to a *field of practice* (Bourdieu 1990), but could also include communities of various kind. Examples of relevant meso-level research could include studies of deprived areas or critical studies of the labour market, the social security system or the organization of social work. Considering the latter, there is a pressing need in many western countries for research on the organizational conditions for professional social work; particularly on how the increasing focus on standardized and evidence based practices affect the condition for situated professional discretion. I should also like to encourage studies that investigate the field of social work as a “social field”, in Bourdieu’s sense of the word; as a space of objective relations, with a specific set of rules and where the locations and social positions of actors are defined by their *habitus* and by the amount of *capital* of various forms that they possess.

The macro level, then, refer to the wider national or global society and to social and cultural structures. It refers to patterns of social change and how it affects all from political values, to the distribution of goods and burdens in society. Examples of relevant macro-level research could include cross-national comparisons of social

policies or how the allocation of trust and social capital in society affect the prevalence of social problems. It is important to acknowledge the vast impact of social change on the practice of social work, not only on the amount and composition of social problems but also on the applicability of strategies to combat them. As the early social work research was closely linked to the development of sociology and its interests for the social consequences of industrialization (Rubington & Weinberg, 1995), social work research today should reflect, and study, how social problems are produced and affected by post-industrialization and globalization and other features of late modernity (Bauman 2004). It is probably safe to say that social problems are increasingly global in nature even though their effects are local (Bauman 2004), and there is a pressing need to challenge the structures and processes that produce them. This requires international cooperation, guided by cross-national, macro level comparative research.

The examples of relevant research mentioned here is but illustrations and not necessarily the best ones. They should not be read as recommendations as to what should be given priority. Such recommendations can only be made in relation to specific contexts. The point here is that the scope of relevant research in social work is, thematically speaking, extremely wide, which is splendidly illustrated by the mandate referred to above. Perhaps the way to delimit the scope of social work research is not so much by topics as by its purpose; that is to contribute to the stock of knowledge, understanding and readiness required to prevent social problems and deprivation and to assist people to gain and keep control over their lives. Social work research is a critical undertaking in that it is never only *about* society but also always *for* the society, though not in the form of paternalistic sentiments but as an ethical imperative.

The articles making up this issue of JCSW reflect a great variety of relevant research, referring to all three levels of research referred to above. Thommesen's article on *Master narratives and narratives told by people with mental health and drug problems* are based on individual accounts of the experiences of living on the edge of ordinary society. Through comparisons of individual cases the article convincingly show how master narratives of the drug abuser lock people into predefined positions that make it difficult to negotiate about and even to envisage alternative identities. The article is important in that it helps to destabilize essentialist and dominant perceptions of the drug abuser in a way that calls for a closer look, beyond manifestations and cultural representations, to reach a sounder picture of the individuals at hand. Also Jessen's article on *Job satisfaction and social rewards in the social services* reports on individual accounts, but first of all with reference to aspects and processes on meso level. The article shows that while managers and practitioners perceive their work equally satisfying, what contribute to this satisfaction varies. While managers define properties of the position, such as control over work, particularly rewarding, practitioners value the recognitions and positive feedback from superiors and clients higher.

From a macro perspective Bode's article on *Social care going market* report on a cross-national study of the provision of elderly care, reflecting a wide range of societal processes and global trends. Drawing on a larger study on the 'culture of welfare markets' the article compare the organization of elderly care provision of Canada, Britain, France and Germany. The article show a rather 'fuzzy' picture in which both liberal and more corporatist elements are mixed, in varies degree, indicating a certain conversion taking place among traditionally different welfare regimes. This is explained not as a linear trend but rather as product of an ongoing strategic adaptation to complex and fluctuating national and international influences. By providing an exciting and thorough analysis of the organization of elderly care services in four major countries, the article also creates an interesting and useful backdrop to which a long range of social services can be related.

In a European context social work and welfare is seen almost exclusively as matter for the public sector. Despite privatization and growing marketization in European welfare states, as is thoroughly discussed in Bode's article, private actors and initiatives are perceived as elements in a publically and politically coordinated welfare policy. In a more global perspective this becomes problematic in that the public sector in many countries play a more modest role in welfare delivery leaving more room for and responsibility to private actors. This is vividly described by Ryen, Temba and Matotay in their article on *Company welfare and social work ethics*. Drawing on primary and secondary data, both from the majority and the minority world the authors explore the variety, difference and character of company welfare, defined as fringe benefits, perks or other remunerations that clearly exceed ordinary salary and reasonable working conditions. By relating company welfare to a set of ethical principles of social work the article discuss whether, and with what possible costs private companies may form a potential job arena for social workers. The merit of this article is not only that it extend the scope of social work to areas hardly discussed in a minority world context but also that it lucidly demonstrate the contextual character of social work research, practice and education. It also illustrates the point made that relevant social work research is not defined by the topic itself but by the extent to which the research respond to contextual requirements for social work to carry out its purpose.

References

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Rubington, Earl & Weinberg, Martin S. (1995) "Social problems and sociology", in Rubington, Earl & Weinberg, Martin S. (eds.) *The Study of Social Problems*. Oxford University Press.

(Endnotes)

¹. IFSWs official website: <http://www.ifsw.org/f38000138.html>