

SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE AS A RESOURCE IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

NYGREN LENNART¹

UMEÅ UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

INTRODUCTION

Social work knowledge is produced and reproduced in a complex relationship between practice, education and research. Even if actors in these different fields emphasize the idea of knowledge as a crucial aspect in social work for its mission to achieve development and change, there is no linear function between knowledge production and practice. Bridging institutions such as Research and Development (R&D) departments in social work organizations hold a specific potential when it comes to connect university research with practice.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social development in general includes learning and application of new knowledge into practice. Jacobs and Cleveland developed a generic theoretical framework for social development where they define it as “The process of organizing human energies and activities at higher levels to achieve greater results” (Jacobs &

1 Correspondence to Lennart Nygren, Social Work Department, Umeå University, Sweden. E-mail: ennart.Nygren@Socw.umu.se.

Cleveland, 1999). Midgley (1995) meant that social development is a statist intervention that provides an alternative approach to welfare, which seeks to harmonise social policies and programmes with measures deigned to promote economic development. Gray (2010) demonstrates the “diverse discourses of social development” and warns that social development is “being co-opted by Third Way politics and professionalization processes” and that it is “losing its transformative, critical edge, and morphing into a neoliberal social investment approach that absolves government of its responsibility for the welfare of citizens” (p. 463). Even more problematic is that social development can mean radically different things in the welfare states of the West, in comparison with eg. Asian or African conditions.

The context of this paper is Sweden, and the way Sweden has organized its social services via the 290 municipalities. In this context, social development can mean developing social systems through collaboration between social services and university based research.

MODE-1 OR MODE-2?

The audit society, the evidence-based discourse and the discipline bound old-school knowledge production all tend to make research into an aggregated activity that is far away from social work practices. The link between practice and research tends to become narrow and only include aspects that are measurable or auditable (or too abstract as in some of the academic research). It is still production of knowledge that can be labelled as “mode-1” according to Gibbons et al. (1994). Their idea was that robust knowledge can no longer be claimed from mode-1-research, within a single discipline, but will require a cross-connection between different domains of society. Mode-2 production of knowledge can be briefly described as:

- those that apply new knowledge are in close contact with those engaged in the research itself,
- there is an extensive exchange between different theoretical approaches, research methods and practical problem.

- research project groups are organized with no or low hierarchy.
- the researcher must be reflexive in relation to his own position in the specific research context and in relation to target groups for the research.
- the production of knowledge is created in a continuous interaction between scientists and the environment in which research may be relevant, i.e. a more relativistic idea of "truth".

Even if the idea of a mode-2-research approach seems attractive, it has faced critique (e.g. Pestre, 2003) for being over-optimistic and neglecting issues of power and context. Nevertheless, the mode-2-proposal criteria are relevant to the discussion about knowledge in social work. The relationship between university research and service-close research (R&D) can serve as an example to demonstrate dilemmas that might appear when trying to move social research toward a mode-2-approach.

THE DIFFERENT ROLES OF UNIVERSITY AND R&D

The university's mission is, in Sweden, stated a law that states: "The mandate of higher education institutions shall also include third stream activities and the provision of information about their activities, as well as ensuring that benefit is derived from their research findings." (Higher Education Act 1996:1392). There is no such legal framework for the knowledge that is produced by the R&D's in Swedish municipalities. They are said to contribute to more efficient services, support reorganizations, they have a particular role to be close to services, have a role to transfer knowledge and to create communications channels (Ekermo, 2002).

Some of the most important problems related to the relationship between academic research in social work and social work practice are:

1. Knowledge interests are diverse. Social science is both technical, practical and critical in Habermas' vocabulary (Habermas, 1968. Research in social work is (was) critically oriented,

which sometimes resulted in conflicts with the managers and politicians of social services. When social organizations were examined and exposed in critical reports, service organizations found it hard to absorb the critical review.

The role of R&D's is to be close to core activities of social services and to contribute to the development of these. This means that researchers within R&D's live under certain restrictions, and it can be hard to adapt a critical approach but also a pressure to support technical interests of knowledge.

2. The relationship between the R and the D in the R&D-concept. Should they be clearly separated? Should universities emphasize R or D? The Frascati Manual that OECD uses to classify research and development defines R as "a systematic effort to search for new knowledge or ideas with or without a specific application in view", while D is a "systematic approach that uses research, scientific knowledge or new ideas to bring new materials, goods, services, processes, systems, methods or significant improvements of existing ones".

And in R&D's: local politicians hesitate to use local tax money for research funding, because it is the state-funded universities task to do research. There is a pressure on R&D's to emphasize the D rather than the R by this and other arguments.

3. The social field consists of a large variety of specialized areas. A small number of university researchers cannot cover both the great variation that exists in the social field and the variation due to that municipalities differ structure and governance. University research needs to work on a more aggregate level and thus becomes distanced from local practice. This problem is exacerbated further by a pressure in the academic world to strive for "excellence" by publishing in good journals and receive funding from the fine research councils. Research clusters in a limited number of specialities.
4. Scientists and various professionals within the public sector use different terminology to describe social activities, and this

can sometimes create unnecessary distance. The academic pop-word “discourse” collide with managerial words of the public services (controller; balanced scorecard). This language problem reflects the university’s need for theoretical abstractions, while services are under managerial pressure.

5. Different quality criteria are used to judge the research. R&D research is still subordinated to the general quality criteria available for academic research. The publications issued seek a research-rate level. But at the same time, the research that R&D’s deliver must be relevant and useful for practice, something that not always applies to academic research. This creates a cross-pressures on R & D research.
6. A final problem is how to work together for a long-term knowledge. R&D research can be used as an impetus for change within an organization, but it is seldom designed to give a contribution to the research front in a way that would allow other organizations and researchers to benefit from it. University research suffers from a somewhat different problem. The research here is cumulative oriented. But this cumulativity results in knowledge building as narrowly defined silos.

University research and research and R&D’s show – in different ways – a lack of continuity and should also be able to make common cause to achieve robust knowledge. Cumulativity is not so much about designing repeated, randomized, controlled trials. It may as well involve the development of theory and qualitative comparisons of different scenarios and ways of organizing social work.

A prerequisite for such an interaction is communication. R&D and university researchers need to meet which requires changes in attitudes, resources, and sometimes common spaces. It is important to communicate the importance of long-term designs in order to provide a common platform to work from.

To return to the logic of mode-2-research this requires close contact, cross-disciplinary, open organizations, researcher reflexivity and a vital interface between research and application.

REFERENCES

1. Ekermo, M. (2002) *Den mångtydiga FoU-idén*. Örebro: Örebro Studies in Social Work.
2. Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowonty, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., & Trow, M. (1994) *The new production of knowledge: The dynamics of Science and research in contemporary societies*. London: Sage.
3. Gray, M. (2010) *Social development and the status quo: professionalization and Third Way co-optation*. International Journal of Social Welfare. 19, pp. 463-470.
4. Habermas, J. (1968). *Knowledge and human interests*. Cambridge, Policy Press.
5. Jacobs, G. & Cleveland, H. (1999). See website: www.icdp.org/development_tjepu/SocialDevTheory.htm.
6. Midgley, J. (1995). *Social development: The developmental perspective in social welfare*. London, Sage.
7. Pestre, D. (2003) *Regimes of knowledge production in society. Towards a more political and social reading*. Minerva, 41(3), pp. 245-261.