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Research as an element in social work's ongoing search for identity

Social work has always had an uneasy relationship with the field of research and it is to be welcomed that the issue of research has recently received so much attention, particularly in the UK where for the first time the ESRC sponsored a series of seminars on Theorising Social Work Research in 1999/2000. Undoubtedly, taking research findings and above all taking the debate on research methodology seriously contributes to the social status of the profession and British social work experiences much uncertainty in this regard. In reviewing these developments in their wider social and political context reveals that the options being debated with regard to the research methodlogy appropriate to social work represent not just technical or instrumental possibilities for the achievement of given goals. Rather, these controversies are closely linked to the issue of the identity of social work, and it is suggested here that these debates do not coincide accidentally but that there is a historical and intricate connection between them. Only from a clearer position towards the formation of social work identities can the question of how to engage in research be answered comprehensively.

The most striking observation on social work's identity is that it is a disunited profession, not just in an international context where it presents a bewildering variety of professional titles and intellectual discourses, but also at a national level where in every country several professional profiles exist in parallel, sometimes contesting each other's territories. In the UK this relates not just to the recent split between social work and probation but also to the relationship between social work and community work, youth work and care work. The growing popularity of care management is likely to fragment the professional field further and the introduction of national social care councils may formalize the relationship between these traditions but will do little to create a common sense of identity or to invigorate the intellectual dialogue between them. Creating a unified identity might be a justifiable professional interest, but it might run counter to

the actual social mandate that this professional group has acquired and has striven to develop. Identifying the common features of the different forms of social work can only result from a clearer historical and conceptual understanding of social work's inherent diversity.

For theoretical, but also for practical purposes it is important to understand this diversity as neither the product of mere vagaries of historical and administrative forces impinging on the development of the social professions nor as the differentiated, self-generated unfolding of principled intellectual positions. It arose fundamentally from the tension between the profession's necessity to engage with a given historical, social and political reality and its desire, necessary also for its survival as a recognisable profession, to distance itself from these structural contexts and to establish fields and methods of autonomous action. This tension, and the ensuing contradictions, correspond to the profession's ambivalent position between 'system' and 'lifeworld', to use Habermas' analytical grid (Habermas 1987). The social professions came into existence, in their various forms and in different countries, in a very distinct historical period of the development of modern societies in which these domains moved apart and they still reflect that split in their actions and appearance. Therefore the tension, like the diversity with which these professions present themselves, is not something that can and should be resolved. Rather, in the ability to maintain and operate accountably within this tension lies the actual possibility for a distinct kind of social action and thereby of realising social work's social mandate. For an answer to the vexing question about social work's contemporary identity much depends therefore not on the definitive resolution of the current controversy over research methods, which, as shall be shown, is not a new phenomenon at all, but on establishing a connection between the epistemological questions in social work and a theory of society, towards which research can take position.

This shall be attempted in the following with reference to Habermas' particular way of analysing the development of modern societies for which he uses the distinction between lifeworld and system. Both refer simultaneously to a given state of society whereby lifeworld captures those aspects and processes in which people experience themselves as actors capable of expressing intentions and giving meaning to their world, whereas system denotes the structural consequences of those actions which ensure the material reproduction of society via the medium of power and money. Modern societies, according to Habermas, are characterised by increasing differentiations within those two domains which results in their 'uncoupling' and, on account of the dictate of the

sheer ‘success’ of rationality in the system, the gradual ‘colonisation’ of the lifeworld by the system.

It is important to recognise that the origins of social work belong to both domains (Rauschenbach 1999). It received decisive impulses from initiatives at the level of the lifeworld in as much as voluntary activities, of both the charitable middle class as well as the self-help and solidarity-creating working class type, reflected the prevalent diversity of values and aspirations for a ‘better society’. At the same time the integrative requirements of industrialising societies outlined the contours of welfare systems not as philanthropy but as control calculations to set firm boundaries of and limits to de-stabilising forces within which social work also was allocated its place and function. This increased the pressure on the emergent profession to become incorporated into the public systems of social policy and the agenda of national social and cultural integration. Social work became an intermediary between lifeworld and system, sharing in the differentiation and specialisation of both but also developing its mediating functions in both directions. Contemporary contradictions in social work represent ‘professionally alienated, displaced social contradictions’ and manifest themselves in the alternatives ‘social work as social commitment vs. social work as a paid occupation, as resulting from the mandate given by clients vs. the result of an organisational and societal mandate, as self-help vs. help from the outside, as care vs. control – all still echoing the old basic controversy: does social change reflect the actual lived interests of people or is it social reform in the interest of the stability of the system’ (Marzahn 1982, p. 20).

These contradictions show up also in some of the fundamental ambiguities in the area of research. When studies take for instance recourse to notions of ‘community building’ or to ‘female qualities of caring’, latterly also to the concept of empowerment, and when research methodologies favour ‘emancipatory research’ we sense at once the ‘promise’ of those reference points resonating from their lifeworld qualities, but closer inspection of their use in particular contexts reveal that they can all have instrumental social control implications and can be used for such purposes (Humphries 1997). And reversely, resorting to principles and criteria of objectivity and rationality, key instruments of the system’s ability to hold and legitimise power in modernity, became at times a means of resisting that colonisation and of providing a critical counter-reference to a system that wanted to use the social professions merely for purposes of social control.

Given this intermediary function of social work, the wider significance of discourses on research methodology cannot be elaborated without reference to the intersection of these two sets of dynamics. They play a role on the one hand in the epistemological ambiguity between what has been classically described as the alternatives of social work as art and as science, and on the other hand in the ambivalence between striving for full, autonomous professionalisation and the retention of the empowering elements of 'voluntarism' and the solidarity with service users they can convey.

Some elements of these complex interconnections have become visible in the debate on social work research methods in the UK. While the prevailing pragmatism in the approach to research and to practice methods in this country (Powell 2002) masked some of the realisation of the full extent of the issues that are stake in this debate, the political implications of the polarisation became nevertheless apparent. Broadly speaking the debate divides into two camps, although this characterisation should remain mindful of the interlinking complexity of interests referred to above which is present within each of the positions and which therefore gives rise to further differentiations in terms of the pragmatics of organisational policies and of the impact of post-structuralist critiques (Shaw 1999, Kazi 2000).

On the one hand there is renewed interest in and advocacy for the relevance to social work of research methods which take up the tradition of positivism and empiricism with the promise of providing accuracy of measurements, reliability of results, transparency of actions and hence of enhancing the public accountability of the profession (Macdonald 1994, Reid 1994, Dillenburger 1998). Social work has always been suspected of lacking in an empirical base for its methods of intervention, particularly an empirical base that was not borrowed from studies conducted by other disciplines, and there is good reason to suggest that the profession has a need to confront data about the outcome of its interventions (Shaw 1999).

On the other hand this positivist stance is being contested from a heuristic perspective on research in social work which emphasises the elaboration and evaluation of subjective meanings as the key to understanding social phenomena. These meanings remain hidden to quantitative enquiry on account of the detachment required by that method and they can therefore be captured best by qualitative approaches which aim at giving expression to the authentic voice of the 'research subject'(Ruckdeschel, 1985, Sherman and Reid 1994, White 1998). This approach inverts, or at

least relativises, the relationship between ‘expert’ and ‘people with mere experience’ and thereby exposes and criticises the differentials in power involved (Beresford and Evans 1999).

The categorisation of such opposing positions is far from simple and clear cut. Rather it is overlaid with a host of agendas which have a direct bearing on the gravitational pull of the various options and which can prompt curious border crossings between these theoretical positions. Chief among those is the quality assurance agenda which itself has a professional and a political side. The political agenda, noticeable particularly in the UK but spreading also to other parts of Europe (Rauschenbach 1999), is about a restructuring of social work in terms of management criteria which emphasise cost-effectiveness and thereby outcome orientation. In research terms this is reflected in a shift from a focus on issues of principle and problem causation towards studies of policy implementation and effectiveness (Fisher 1999, Gibbs 2001). The professional agenda amounts to an attempt to re-constitute the status and to that extent the autonomy of the social work profession under these changed policy conditions by seeking to develop ‘evidence based practice’. This concern emphasises reliance on research findings rather than on established intervention methods as the constitutive part of professional social work (Taylor and White 2001). It implies that once a secure knowledge base for a given situation has been established intervention becomes a matter of following given procedures (and thereby avoiding ‘mistakes’). Quality assurance, in this version, seeks to combine a basically empiricist research framework with the concern for consumer views and participation. It purports to subvert the dichotomies of positivism and phenomenology, quantitative and qualitative methods as well as of adjustment (control) and emancipation which had beset the agenda, thereby seducing an insecure profession with the promise of bringing it intellectually into the fold of post-modernism while providing certain assurances against the angst of total relativism. In this line of development not only is pragmatism showing itself at its acrobatic best (Trinder 1996), it also, by claiming to have resolved the tensions, marks a surrender to the logic (and the power) of the system and action is reduced to procedures.

It is not surprising, therefore, that intellectually the discontent over such an alluring but flawed settlement is manifesting itself. The question is how to effectively mobilise resistance and counter-arguments against a development that takes colonisation to new heights. In the UK the concept of ‘realism’ (Pawson and Tilley 1997, Kazi 1998, Taylor and White 2000) is being suggested as a reference point for a possible settlement of the at times strongly conflicting interests and as a means of giving the social work profession a unifying profile and more secure

social status while retaining the lifeworld link in the form of an action perspective. ‘Practitioners construct models of their practice, which include their theoretical orientation, practice wisdom, accepted knowledge amongst peers, tacit knowledge and previous experience of what works, for whom and in what contexts’ (Kazi 2000 p. 764). The process continues through the participative testing of the hypotheses thus derived to lead to a context-specific intervention programme that ‘harnesses enabling mechanisms and steers clear of disabling mechanisms’ (Kazi 2000, pp 764-5). The resultant models of ‘scientific realism’ (Kazi 2000), ‘sturdy relativism’, ‘realistic realism’ (Taylor and White 2001) or ‘practice-focused reflexivity’ (Sheppard 1998) appear to satisfy the societal demands for greater accountability, the political interests for efficiency and effectiveness and the professional concerns for autonomy based on scientific stringency. However, there is a sense of premature settlement about them before the depth of the conflicts and the implications of social work’s inherent diversity and plurality have been fully explored. Their concern with integration (of science and arts, of rationality and emotions, of knowledge and values, of quantitative and qualitative models of research, of objectivity and subjectivity, of professional and consumer interests, of political agendas of control and of empowerment) paradoxically confirms their rootedness in and continued adherence to a dualistic epistemology disconnected from a theory of society. ‘Realism’ as the reliance on an objectivity which, though hidden and unreachable, serves as a given yardstick, surrenders the understanding of social processes to a scientific project which, by its very success in the area of science and technology, blocks the elaboration of values and meanings constitutive of societies and thereby the communicative potential constitutive of social work.

Exploring instead social work’s intermediary role between lifeworld and system also in the area of research leads instead first of all to a sharper realisation of the conflicts and contradictions involved. But in staying with this aspect of diversity also, with the inability to unite models of research and models of social work under one common approach, the realisation of social work’s place in both lifeworld and system releases its communicative potential. For Habermas the heuristic distinction between lifeworld and system ultimately leads to the distinction of two related realms of action in society, the distinction between communicative and instrumental action (Habermas 1987). The latter is guided by principles and criteria of efficiency, necessary for the structural integration and material reproduction of society, by impersonal mechanisms therefore best exemplified by the workings of the market. Communicative action, however, cannot come about on the basis of ‘given’ reference points of meaning and understanding, but strives instead to constitute, out of the infinite diversity of subjective and conflicting meanings,

the conditions for consensus. The openness of this process, its precarious ability to invoke reflexion and critique, are the very conditions under which communication, in its full sense, can only come about (Habermas 1990).

Habermas emphasises the importance of the distinction between instrumental and communicative action not only for the epistemological process as such, but also for the creation of identities (Habermas 1972). He elaborates on the observations by Peirce that the (individual) human self that derives its identity solely from the success or failure of instrumental action can only develop in a negative way. It learns to become aware of itself only in moments where the discrepancy between its own position and the given, generalised consensus of 'common sense wisdom' becomes apparent. This observation could also be extended to the constitution of social work's professional identity. Once it surrenders to the rationalistic requirements of the system and therefore adopts the dogma of positivism, it becomes set on an instrumental perspective on action and its identity becomes negatively constituted in terms of the 'remaining' discrepancy between claim (to efficiency and effectiveness) and resultant achievements. Since this discrepancy will always remain considerable, the negative constitution of identity of social work is also likely to result in a public negative image.

These consequences cannot be avoided by means of the recourse to client participation in research, at least not as long as participation is an instrumental device to give the results greater validity. Used in this way it preserves and simply transfers this basic underlying approach of research as instrumental action to an expanded 'community of researchers and practitioners'. The views of users, however representative they might be in statistical terms, are always going to be partial and in many ways 'parochial' even though the results of such research can render themselves more impervious to criticism as they seem to satisfy both methodological and ideological criteria of 'representation' and 'representativeness' to a greater extent than in research conducted 'on them'. Within an instrumental perspective of research the greater 'fit' of needs and outcomes achieved by client participation might represent a quantitative gain, but already in the application of such results the negative effects become tangible in as much as the approach renders those users, who do not 'fit' into the framework, totally defenceless and without representation, their right to subjectivity and to having a public voice having been further eroded.

This suggests an ongoing need for social work research to be elated back to communicative action and hence the need to fully develop a hermeneutic approach to research. This is not to juxtapose a superior research method to the ones touched on so far, but to establish some meta-theoretical criteria which could guide the search for appropriate methods that might have to differ from situation to situation but can be evaluated against criteria established by means of consensus-oriented communication. The existence of a diversity of possible methods necessitates communication, the imposition of one dogma, just as the indifference to relativity, forecloses communication and thus understanding. It might therefore be less important to see social work as a science or as art and to endorse the choice with the promotion of the corresponding research methods but to recognise more fully the historical nature of social work in relation to the differentiation of modern societies.

The discussion of key moments in the development of the social professions might illustrate the usefulness of such a perspective. A defining moment for the emergence of a distinct social work identity was the discrepancy between the 'case by case' approach, pioneered by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) at the end of the 19th century and the 'sociological' (structural) approach promoted by the Fabian Society. This controversy was not just about practice methodology, nor was it a clear-cut ideological conflict; it can also be regarded as paradigmatic for the different epistemologies applied by both sides and as such it is an important indication of the early differentiation of research methods in this discipline in relation to lifeworld and system. The individualism of the COS approach reflected a moral commitment to the transmission of values through direct interaction with the poor and destitute, but the moral principles were applied not purely in a dogmatic, 'top-down' way but through the 'study' of individual life circumstances. 'Investigation' became a characteristic key method of the society with which it sought to justify the shift from 'spontaneous' and indiscriminate (and thereby socially and morally deleterious) almsgiving to rational, evidence-based intervention which it sought to promote as its contribution to the improvement of social conditions. Social enquiry at the individual level became a research and an intervention method at once for the COS worker; in Octavia Hill's famous definition: 'By knowledge of character more is meant than whether a man is a drunkard or a woman dishonest, it means knowledge of the passions, hopes and history of the people… how to move, touch, teach them' (Hill 1969 quoted in Woodroffe 1962, p. 52). The gathering of copious case notes by the charity workers (Bosanquet 1914) reflects a mode of research that seeks to engage and to understand from 'within' the life context of the clients and hence the lifeworld, no matter how much the actual evaluation and the resulting decisions are overlaid with the requirements of 'the

system' in the form of given economic and political norms. The society's own struggle to resolve the ensuing contradictions with reference to philanthropy as 'scientific charity' show the mediating function social work, even in this early pre-professional form, had taken on. It placed itself between the requirements of a lifeworld, in which countless interests and value positions sought to articulate themselves and to maintain the viability of family and community life in the face of urbanisation and industrialisation, and the impersonal integrative requirements of the systems of national politics and economics.

The agenda of the Fabian Society started at the system end of the spectrum with the aim of achieving stability and integration through structural reforms. Scientific enquiry, inspired by positivism and a firm belief in the impact of social data obtained through painstaking social research, as undertaken by Booth and Rowntree, formed its natural basis, although the reforms followed by no means 'automatically' on foot of the convincing data but had to be campaigned for. The agents of Fabianism therefore had to engage with the lifeworld very directly if they were to bring about changes, and this, despite their opposing positions on the Royal Commission on the reform of the Poor Law of 1905 (Woodroofe 1962) provided an eventual meeting ground between COS and Fabians in the form of joint training courses for social workers at the London School of Economics.

Another instance of these unfolding dynamics is the wide acclaim and reception found by the earliest 'social work textbook', Mary Richmond's 'Social Diagnosis' (1917). It can be attributed to its resonance with early social workers finding themselves in this mediating role but without recourse to a systematic method. It is significant that this text elevates 'research' to a central position in intervention, thereby revealing its pioneering potential and its limitations. With this textbook casework became a defining characteristic of social work because it could demonstrate that it was more than a descriptive term. It could lay claim to being a scientific method on account of the positivism in which it is ultimately rooted and which it seeks to share with the great model profession of medicine where diagnosis based on scientific principles formed the proof of its decisive turn away from quackery. The limitations of Mary Richmond's approach lay in the epistemological emptiness of her concept of diagnosis which purported to be a gathering of 'facts' but which failed to problematise the relationship between fact and evaluation. As Annette Garrett recalls her own mistaken beliefs derived from training at that time, 'if we could just have enough facts we would know what to do' (Garrett 1949, p 222). By trying to resolve the tension between demands on both the part of the lifeworld and the system, of which practitioners like

Richmond were so acutely aware, the casework approach deprived itself of its actual communicative potential but made the profession socially accepted.

Alice Salomon, the pioneer of German social work and social work education, articulated the same dilemmas and under the very title borrowed from Mary Richmond's work. Her book 'Soziale Diagnose' (Salomon 1926), for which she also considered the title 'Soziale Recherche', reflects on the epistemological problems for social workers and suggests a combination of inductive and deductive approaches to the acquisition of knowledge, both in individual cases and as the research basis for specific intervention methods in general. Her account is clearly a struggle between holding on to the respectability which a scientific approach can convey and doing justice to the hermeneutic processes which practice experience suggests. 'The data collected have different meanings. The essential aspect is the correct evaluation of these details, their comparison, their interpretation' (Salomon 1926, p.7). Elsewhere Alice Salomon resorts to appeals to 'motherliness' as a key ingredient of social work epistemology which for her is not a biological reference point but the level at which the experience of caring can be universalised and therefore contains also a very distinction vision of a classless society (Salomon 1919). Here the need for an integration of research and practice, of methodological and political concerns, of an objectivity that does not silence the voice of subjectivity, especially of women, finds an appealing though 'old-fashioned' expression. What is lacking is not only, as Salomon herself acknowledges, the contribution of an appropriate psychology that elaborates on the helping process as a process of (self-)discovery (for both client and helper), but also an explicit epistemology which does not devalue the intermediary stance such approaches try to maintain as unscientific.

The eventually almost universal reception Freudian psychology received in social work served exactly this purpose but is closely linked to its own ambivalent heuristics. Freud's achievement, as Habermas emphasises in his review of social epistemology, has been to elevate the process of self-reflexion to the level of a stringent scientific undertaking and to thereby expand the scope and method of hermeneutics significantly (Habermas 1972). The logic of the seemingly illogical sphere of the unconscious reveals itself not through a standardised, objectivised code of symbols applied by an all-knowing expert who penetrates those barriers (even though this misrepresentation has often been attributed to Freud), but on the contrary its truth reveals itself only through acts of self-reflexion which the therapist is merely instrumental in bringing about. This defines the mediating role of the therapist in very stringent terms. It gives each therapeutic

encounter the character of a discovery, of research, but not conducted on a patient but through the self-searching work of the patient herself.

Applied to casework the method has the potential of satisfying both the requirements of the system within which social service work takes place and which aims ultimately at producing adjustment to the 'inevitable' in the form of social norms, whilst engaging with and supporting the communicative abilities of individuals in their lifeworld aimed at being better understood – by others and by themselves. The much maligned term 'working through' expresses in its original sense this dual aspect in the encounter between client and social worker, a complex process in which social workers were, on account of their societal position and mandate, always already engaged by necessity but for which they so far lacked a comprehensive heuristic tool that could capture this complexity without reducing it.

The Freudian mode of enquiry was by no means immune against reductionist uses and had a similar effect on parts of the intellectual tradition of 'applied social science', prevalent mostly in Anglo-Saxon countries, as it had on that of social pedagogy, which prevailed in most continental European countries. When the interests of the respective social professions for status and public recognition link with the process of rationalisation and bureaucratisation they tend to generate practice and research models geared towards objectivity, value-neutrality and effectiveness. Freudian concepts supplemented the tools for 'manipulating the environment' with those that remedied individual pathology rationally and effectively (Garrett 1949). Paradoxically, this concern with making comprehensive objective assessments generated very little in the way of primary research, a requirement which the greater public acceptance had obviated. Commenting on the expansion of casework services in the 1920s and 30s in the US Leiby observes 'it is curious that the demand for these services expanded steadily, despite the fact that their practitioners were never able to offer either a very cogent argument or impressive efficacy for their practice' (Leiby 1969, p. 314). The answer lay in the social acceptance of the methods and its proponents who had found a place in society.

While the effects of incorporation of social pedagogy into the growing welfare bureaucracy of the Weimar Republic had a similar effect on the instrumental use of new psychological insights, such as presented by psychoanalysis, there were differences in the way this academic tradition raised issues concerning the relationship between lifeworld and system. Pedagogy, in contrast to social

science grounded in positivism, was initially not so much an academic discipline but represented a social and intellectual movement to which, to some extent, the unified German nation of the late 19th century owed its existence or at least its identity. The call for cultural renewal, articulated by the romantic as well as the liberal movements, was not content to expose the deficits and dangers of modern society but proposed cultural alternatives to the growing fragmentation and alienation of the population by means of a cultural renewal and opportunities for self-improvement. Particularly in the form of social pedagogy it set out not just a supplementary structure of education, outside the school system, but an alternative approach to education as such that started with the potential of each individual which needed to be fostered towards a sense of community, rather than with the requirements of the political system for having a well adjusted population. The defining form of enquiry of this 'reform movement' became hermeneutics, elaborated above all in the work of Dilthey, who by contrasting epistemologies in science and in the humanities ('Geisteswissenschaften') addressed very specifically the needs of pedagogy for a reliable basis of knowing. The question was whether the practice of social pedagogy, in seeking to find a place within the overall (largely authoritarian) educational and social policies of the state, would be able to apply this methodology for purposes of primary research and the search for hermeneutic forms of intervention.

This project was realised to some extent in the Weimar Republic when social pedagogues developed their own research approaches to the study of youth in direct contrast to the prevailing methods in the social sciences. Qualitative methods, such as diaries and accounts of their daily lives given by young people themselves, came to play an important role (Böhnisch et al. 1997) not just in understanding the pressures and dilemmas they were facing but also in constructing methods of engaging these youngsters that started from those experiences. The influence of Freudian concepts on this type of research was considerable, particularly in the area of residential child care where child-oriented approaches were being promoted and old regimes changed drastically. It is noteworthy that psychoanalytic concepts in the version promoted by Alfred Adler inspired numerous pedagogical grassroots movements in German-speaking countries and also in the USA and often combined with socialist political movements which criticised and opposed the authoritarianism that prevailed in public child and youth services (Schille 1997).

Overall, the 1920s in Austria and Germany were marked by sharply contrasting 'social experiments' with reform projects, which foundered, however, partly on the ideological controversies in which they became embroiled, and partly simply on the lack of financial

resources. Conceptually the pedagogical reform movement hypothesised that starting with the subjective notions and wishes of the young people would not further their alienation from and the fragmentation of society but that this type of socialisation would eventually find its realisation in a more solid sense of community and social integration. The evidence in terms of outcomes of such practice methods did often not support this as many youngsters were simply too disruptive in groups and communities to endorse the ideal. The (perverse) realisation of this project of establishing a correspondence between the spontaneous unfolding of the enthusiastic social commitment of youth and a wider, national community which provided a 'home' for these youthful ideals was engineered by the welfare politics of Hitler Fascism whose youth policies incorporated those very ideas. It institutionalised an ideology-based populist sense of belonging, declaring it to be the realisation of the wishes of the youth movement, albeit, and this was regarded as the price to be paid, through the exclusion and, sometimes quite literal, elimination of those individuals who did not fit into the concept. The imposition of a totalitarian system along those lines disarmed or silenced many formerly critical pedagogues and validated the role of those who were willing to provide fitting epistemologies, of whatever intellectual kind.

Nazi welfare concepts replaced the emergent welfare consensus over the integrative responsibilities of the state based on political negotiations and professional as well as intellectual controversies with a 'given' criterion of belonging, the racist concept of an organic body of the 'folk'. This ideology changed the epistemology of social service staff (in public and non-governmental agencies) decisively. There was no longer any ground for the understanding of subjectivity and negotiation of shared goals – their task became solely the application of objectivised criteria of social pathology, used for purposes of the 'selection' of those whose attitude and physique qualified them as belonging to the national community, and the exclusion, incarceration, 'treatment' (including sterilisation) and eventual murder of those who did not belong (Sünker and Otto 1997). Nazi welfare represents the triumph of instrumental rationality, a system that purports to represent the lifeworld whilst actually swallowing it up and therefore leaves social work no scope for mediation, just for detached, mechanical diagnosis.

The link between social work's attraction to positivist epistemologies and its receptivity for fascist ideology, or indeed the link between epistemology, methodology and the functional requirements of political systems was not recognised, or at least not reflected upon, in the period of post-WWII re-construction and anti-fascist re-education. UN and US led training programmes emphasised the objectivity which casework methods introduced into the assessment and

intervention process as an anti-dote to the apparent receptivity of pedagogy for ideological interference (Lorenz 1994). The approach was infused by what C. Wright Mills called 'the professional ideology of social pathologists' (Mills 1943) which he found prevailing in sociological research: 'The ideal of practicality, of not being "utopian", operated, in conjunction with other factors, as a polemic against the "philosophy of history" brought into American sociology by men trained in Germany' (Mills 1943, p 168). The 'thinking in situations unrelated to structures' for Mills fitted into a social work epistemology that was still shaped by Richmond's 'Social Diagnosis' (Mills 1943, p. 170) and the goals of adjustment to a given reality of social norms were presupposed uncritically.

In terms of social work identity, the first two decades after WWII were a time when a united, universal model of social work seemed achievable, based on the assumption, expressed in terms of ethical principles, that people had basically the same needs everywhere, regardless of culture and social and political context. Parsonian functionalist sociology, which prevailed not just in the US but also in large parts of Europe, provided the backdrop (and an explanation) for the way in which the social professions arranged themselves with the welfare states in whose rapid rise they played an increasingly central role. Universality and identity seemed to be secured even before such claims had been empirically endorsed. This provided renewed evidence that once the link between social work's interest in being fully recognised as a profession and society's need for social work as a factor contributing to social stability and integration has been established, pragmatic-functionalist interests in research and methodology will outweigh those aimed at communicative differentiation of and engagement with lifeworld processes.

Where the unease about the nature and function of research in social work emerged at all, it was discussed from the perspective of whether social work needed its own approach to research or whether it should 'borrow' prevailing models from the social sciences. The 'traditional' instrument of research in social work had been the evaluation of case records, undertaken with a view to understanding the complexity of practice situations and to improve intervention accordingly (Walton 1975, Lyons 2000). But increasingly this was seen as less respectable than the quantitative large scale research approach which represented the social science standard at the time but which could then not be replicated with the resources available to social work. Heineman (1981) observed the establishment of this hierarchical ranking order between models of research based on experimental designs and geared towards prediction and 'ex post facto' evaluative studies: 'The problem is not that these assumptions about what constitutes good science and

hence good social work research never lead to useful knowledge, but, rather, that they are used normatively, rather than descriptively, to prescribe some research methodologies and proscribe others' (Heineman 1981, p 374).

One much noted exception of qualitative research that received wide acclaim was the study by Mayer and Timms (1970), 'The Client Speaks', although immediately the self-critical implications of the research were seen as handing arguments to a political lobby in Britain critical of social work's growing professional autonomy. But the trend towards the dominance of positivist research standards was only halted, temporarily perhaps, with the advent of new social movements in the 1970s and 80s which posed also a profound challenge to the unifying and consolidating trend in the formation of social work's identity. Once the possibility of a plurality of fundamentally contrasting approaches to social work has been conceived, as demonstrated for instance by the emergence of feminist social work or the renewed interest in personal experience over formal qualifications, the profession's position in society becomes insecure and contested. But precisely in this uncertainty new stances on research can also form, leading in turn to a further differentiation of models of practice and a widening of the boundaries of social work overall.

In this situation a starker polarisation set in between universalism and positivism-inspired empiricism on the one hand and a new self-confidence in subjectivism and constructivism on the other. 'Experience' came to be taken seriously again as a subject of and as a vehicle for welfare research, particularly in studies inspired by feminism, which simultaneously challenged the alleged neutrality of conventional approaches. 'Because gender-absence and gender-neutrality in social science is impossible to obtain, presentations in these traditions do not eliminate power relations between women and men, but rather only serve to obscure them' (Hanmer and Hearn 1999, p. 107). Other social movements, notably those of black people, people with disability, psychiatric illness, social care users and trauma survivors, added their voice to the critique of 'top-down research' and sought to re-claim the right to their authentic representation in research (Beresford and Evans 1999).

With those challenges questions of identity moved centre stage once more, not just in terms of the identity of service users, but also of that of service providers, individually and collectively. For the movements promoting emancipatory, user-led research had a very distinct agenda of challenging the professional power of established professions which they saw as maintaining not

least by means of 'authoritative' research. Here the interplay between intellectual, professional and political factors came into play again for the shift in emphasis and orientation really only became effective on the back of social policy changes aimed at altering the role and structure of public social services fundamentally (Gibbs 2001). It appears like a curious and dangerous coincidence for social work that the agendas to 'de-construct' its power and structure are coming from both those directions, from neo-liberal policies and from user movements, which makes it very difficult for social work to respond to it. It might hold sympathy for the 'emancipatory' approach to research as it concurs with some of its central values, but such sympathy is going to be short-lived if it results in the gradual abolition of its recognised place in society. But once this conflict is seen in line with social work's straddling position between system and lifeworld new, less defensive responses become possible, not least in terms of research strategies.

This might also apply with regard to social work facing the dilemmas resulting from the fundamental philosophical challenges posed to all 'truth claims' by post-structural and post-modern positions which compound the uncertainty over its approach to research. Their programme has been to lay bare the power structures contained in all regimes of truth and resulted in the de-stabilisation and de-centring of all positions previously held to be authoritative. Identities can therefore no longer be taken as simply given, but only as constructed and transient, and this sobering realisation not only suspends the authority of empirical studies but also relativises the seeming authenticity of subjective accounts.

Seen from this historical perspective, the sharp divisions over the choice and function of research in social work today are not a new phenomenon. However, they present themselves with unprecedented force, and this indicates not that social work per se is in a confused state but that the rupture between system and lifeworld and the processes of differentiation within each of those domains have become more acute. Social work is unavoidably caught up in this process and finds its role and identity threatened by the bewildering plurality of demands and of reference points in this debate. What seems to be more important than making decisions on whether to pursue this or that research methodology is to relate the discourse on research back to fundamental reflections on the place and role of social work in society. The plurality of forms of social work can serve as a heuristic device to a better understanding of the dilemmas it faces. On the one hand there are many parallel ways of interpreting this role on account of the historical nature of the profession, and this means its dual mandate between system and lifeworld. On the other hand it also provides

a basic understanding for the shared themes connecting those different manifestations. In its link to lifeworld processes, despite their often contradictory effects on epistemology and practice, social work keeps open its potential for communicative action, action that engages with conflicting norms, wishes and aspirations in such a way that it creates the conditions for a consensus (Lorenz 2001). Social work research can ultimately only make sense as research that is congruent with its social mandate, and this means that it needs to develop as communicative action. The many attempts at framing social work research as a reflexive process which are currently under debate are hopeful signs in this direction. This debate needs to be linked, however, to a critical theory of society in order to prevent its function and its results from becoming absorbed into the system with its pursuit of instrumental action, thereby risking to effect unintended consequences of tighter and more powerful social control.

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