The concept of subjectivisation by Adorno – applied in social work

Adornon subjektivoitumisen käsite sosiaalityöhön sovellettuna

Aila-Leena Matthies*

University of Jyväskylä, Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, P.O. Box 567, FIN-67701, Kokkola, Finland

This article focuses upon subjectivisation as one of the core aspects of critical theory. Subjectivisation refers to the process of becoming a subject, a fully responsible, autonomously thinking and acting adult citizen, as opposed to a manipulated and system-functioning object. It is discussed in the context of the current debates on critical reflection in social work, as it contributes to discovering the power structures in which social work is embedded. The aim is not to re-discuss critical theory as a whole, but to point out the process of subjectivisation of social workers and service users as an element for critical self-reflection in social work. The contribution includes a short introduction to the concept of subject and subjectivisation as treated by Adorno, after which a more generalised frame of core dimensions for social work between the ‘Real’ and the ‘Possible’ will be developed, applying the concepts of Adorno’s dialectic approach to critical theory and using them as a tool for critical reflection on social work. Three perspectives are also discussed in which critical reflection, connected with the aim of subjectivisation, is crucial for discovering and analysing contradictions: the dilemma of critical social work in the general institutional context of the new governance of today; social work education in two settings; and finally, the challenge posed for critical reflection and subjectivisation by the current changes in the Nordic model of the welfare state. My main conclusion is that the subjectivisation of citizens is not only their right or an indicator for progressive professionalism, but even a necessary pre-condition for a more just welfare policy.

Keywords: Adorno; critical theory; critical reflection; subjectivisation; social work education; Nordic welfare state


*Email: aila-leena.matthies@chydenius.fi
My aim in this article is to deepen the concept of subjectivisation as introduced by Theodor Adorno, applied to the current debates on critical reflection in social work (Fook 2005, 2008, Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005, White et al. 2006). Stephen Brookfield raises in this issue the problem that the use of the terms reflection and critical reflection does not always necessarily go beyond the surface of rhetoric, nor are the terms consciously rooted in critical theory (see also Fook et al. 2006, p. 3). He clarifies the difference between ‘easy going reflection’ and ‘real critical reflection’, the latter being embedded in the critical theory traditions of the Frankfurt School, Neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis or psychotherapy.

Connected to Brookfield’s contribution I would like to analyse current tendencies in social work as a profession and as a branch of education from a perspective of critical theory as defined by Theodor Adorno, one of the central figures in the Frankfurt School of critical theory. For Adorno, the concept of subject is vital, referring to a fully responsible, autonomously thinking and acting adult citizen, as opposed to manipulated and system-functioning objects. I would like to ask how social work in late modern society compares with Adorno’s concept of critical reflection and the intention to support subjectivisation.

While categorising the existing literature on critical reflection, Fook et al. (2006, p. 4) identify three purposes it is applied to: professional education, research methodology and theoretical frameworks for understanding social life or professional practices. Adorno’s thinking aims largely at methodological and theoretical purposes rather than issues of professional practice. Therefore, the way in which I apply his thoughts to questions of practical social work and education might differ from the mainstream of the social sciences and the philosophical use of his thinking. But I still regard Adorno’s perspective as being useful for critical reflection in social work practice, too. He has also broadly discussed the issues of education as a whole (especially in Adorno 1971). For me, the thinking of Adorno and that of the entire Frankfurt School still remains relevant to social work, although in many cases it is essential to consider the changed historical context.

Adorno’s theses of the role of critical theory in relation to the objects of research are quite helpful for both the role of research and the role of social work. In his paper ‘Soziologie und empirische Forschung’ (1957), Adorno criticises the US-led line of empirical ‘social research’ and the ‘social problem approach’ in the historical context of the 1950s. A critical theory of society aims in a sceptical manner at penetrating all the more closely and in greater depth underneath the surface of a society, the smoother and more polished its façade appears to be. It aims to discover what is behind society and what keeps its machinery running rather than observing
measurable details and generating a deductive theory out of them (Adorno 1957, pp. 196–197).

The following quotation from Adorno points to something which remains in my opinion essential as the focal point of critical reflection, social work and subjectivisation:

In order to be able to install concepts from outside, a theory must translate them into what the thing already has, into what the thing would like to be in its possibility, and to confront the thing with what it is. A theory has to resolve the rigidity of a currently fixed object into a field of conflict between the Possible and the Real (…). (Adorno 1957, p. 197)

These words demonstrate both the dialectic perspective of viewing the world and that of subjectivisation. It can be interpreted as an encouragement to empower the research objects, whatever they are: individuals, groups, communities, regions. It opens up a direction from which to seek solutions to the dilemma of social work, too. The transformation from ideas to action then needs the involvement of the people themselves. Read in this way, the quotation from Adorno allows identification of three essential elements that are relevant to social work as well:

- The task of research is to enable its objects to reflect critically and to gain knowledge about their own situation in a broader context. In the context of social research the concepts of critical theory are tools for discovering contradictions in the societal structures in which people live. I would even say that these contradictions are usually deeper in the case of social work and research related to it than in general, since the people concerned are mainly assumed to be powerless and with poorer access to resources.
- Critical theory gives social work the mission of social development and of effecting change from the ‘Real’ to the ‘Possible’. It is also a requirement to reflect constantly about the difference between these two. In my understanding, critical self-reflection incorporates the notion that actions taken in the reality of social work are constantly mirrored by the question of whether they affect steps in a change towards more justice in a society – the Possible – or just stabilise the current unjust structures.
- A strong element of participation, which could be embedded as a participatory research approach or in participatory models for running services and understanding social work. The research objects and service users themselves find out not only what they are but, in particular, what they want to become and how they want to change their lives. But as I understand it, Adorno’s concept of subjectivisation refers to an even deeper existential meaning of becoming something, what human kind should and could be when fully grown up as autonomous members of society or global humanity, with all the rights and with all the responsibility.

Adorno’s concept of critical theory can help to address critical reflection in two directions: towards the societal structures of the people with whom social workers are working, and as a critical form of self-reflection on social work itself. For Fook and Askeland (2006, pp. 46–47) as well, reflections on power relations and the intention to change them are essential for identifying the ‘critical’ element in critical reflection. These writers also describe the process by which people construct themselves,
referring to the professional self in the process of training. I would understand similar processes as being possible for the people with whom the professionals work. So far, professional subjectivisation – ‘moving from seeing themselves as powerless, marginalized individuals to seeing themselves as reflexive social agents influencing a situation’ (Fook and Askeland 2006, p. 49) – might be a precondition for social workers to be able to empower subjectivisation in their service users.

The vital substance of Adorno’s critical theory lies in the process of becoming a subject. To understand his concepts of subject and critical reflection, it is important to call to mind the historical starting point of his writing. When analysing the fatal role of education in Germany and other countries which made fascism possible, he asks whether ‘Education after Auswitz’ (Adorno 1971) is possible at all. Can human beings be educated without manipulating them from the outside towards one or another, without making young people into the functional units of a system? He constitutes the idea of critical pedagogy, which is aimed only at supporting the individual and collective processes of subjectivisation (Adorno 1971). One precondition for this kind of emancipatory education is that it should be constantly connected with the societal reality. Education which neglects the contradictions inside and outside the school cannot support subjectivisation. Confrontation with manipulating structures belongs to the critical educational process entailed in becoming subjects.

The aim of subjectivisation reflects an extremely apposite demand, especially when discussing social work in the current era dominated by a global market economy, global distribution of the products of the culture industry and narrowing spaces for authentic life. Indeed, it is not only the young people of today who are in constant risk of being transformed to passive objects of the market economy and its various manipulative interests.

From the discrepancy between assumptions and reality towards a dialectic understanding of social work’s world

I would like in this section to develop a more generalised frame of core dimensions for social work between the ‘Real’ and the ‘Possible’, applying these concepts from Adorno’s dialectic approach to critical theory. There is a basic complex of open questions in the traditions of critical reflection in social work which remain open due to their character. They cannot be answered in detail in theoretical models of reflective social work but are rather tasks of reflective practice. The ‘how’ of transformation from critical reflection at a cognitive level of consciousness to a practical level of action in the framework of institutional imperatives still remains open in the debate. Then, the progress of critical reflection as constituted by Brookfield, among others, cannot stop after discovering and identifying the contradictions. It needs to be continued in the form of altered patterns of practical action. Although the consciousness and will are there, social work is in many cases lacking applicable knowledge, courage and good examples of how to maintain changes in the institutional imperatives themselves. This implies that also theoretical thinking and knowledge production will need critical self-reflection as a consequence of facing up to practical realities.

In the face of these sometimes very frustrating dilemmas it is good to regard them in a dialectic way, i.e. to acknowledge that social work indeed has a complex task, which can perhaps never be completed perfectly within an unjust society. Being
realistically thinking adults, we do not believe that a perfect model of society can be attained, but critical social work cannot allow itself to abandon this intention. Social work has the mission to continue to aspire to the good life for all, social equality and to seek examples and steps for achieving these. At the same time, it has to be borne in mind that each new solution will cause new problems, as Luhmann (1986) states. This is how I understand the dialectic approach of Adorno (1971). Critical thinking is not blind to the basic inequality of society nor does it seek to escape in just good optimistic hopes. But neither should it be allowed to give up without trying to make changes.

Social work in a late modern setting is fighting with a constant dilemma between objectivisation and subjectivisation. It is exposed to similar risks to those facing education systems: working towards manipulation instead of subjectivisation, or neglecting the contradictions between the Real and the Possible inside and outside of its own institutions. Those societal and institutional mechanisms that entail hidden or open forms of pressure and hinder a free process of becoming a subject have to be identified. Subjects have to be able to identify and deal with the basic contradictions in their environment in order to process changes in these. Social work must aim to support full citizenship of individuals, who are able to resist manipulative influences.

The importance of participatory and subject-directed approaches is not only in the interests of service users and democracy in general, however. In the frustrating situations created by institutional imperatives or economic pressures, social work itself needs partnership with civil society and the support of citizens and service users. This may be political support at the local or national level. It can also consist of relevant knowledge and ideas, or the demonstration of new perspectives. In many cases, however, institutional settings lead social workers to regard service users as ‘the others’, objects of interventions rather than partners. A self-critical form of reasoning would perhaps go beyond these economic structures, which separate social work from civil society, citizens and service users.

Basically, the professional knowledge of social workers is always incomplete if it cannot be complemented by the experience and knowledge of service users. Intervention processes at the individual, group and community levels can only be successful if service users are motivated to work together with them, if they take the process seriously. Thus subjectivisation of users is not just an idealistic goal but a process that is indispensable for social work to work. To put it even more directly, if social work remains at the level of objectivisation, it will produce pseudo-results only. As I have learned in a long-term community work project with unemployed people (Matthies and Kauer 2004), working according to participatory methods from the bottom up enables social workers to see encouraging processes of self-empowerment among citizens. This can produce real satisfaction for the social workers as well, and can demonstrate that the discrepancy between the Real and the Possible can be bridged.

Brookfield discusses in this issue how social work somehow constantly remains in a dialectic space between a good knowledge of what it should be doing and the reality of its practical actions. Uncertainty is an unavoidable part of social work and cannot be removed by safeguarding formal standards or simplified pictures of working processes. As stated above, it is scarcely possible to believe in a complete, generally applicable model for social work, not even a reflective one. Instead, social work, including practice, research and teaching, has a constant mission to find its
situational and context-bound path between the Real and the Possible, between the institutional imperatives which apply pressure for the objectivisation of people, and the commitment to enabling subjectivisation. Table 1 provides an overview of the various aspects of critical reflection.

This table obviously entails the risk of regarding the world as a dichotomy of good and bad. Also, critical reflection in social work is not protected against becoming dogmatic. Fook (2005) also underlines that the categories which social work is acting between – for example help and control – are not mutually exclusive, but rather they are differently constructed concepts for categorising issues related to

Table 1. Aspects of critical reflection in social work between the Real and the Possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task of theory</th>
<th>Un-reflected ‘Real’</th>
<th>Critical reflection and the ‘Possible’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To constitute the dominant picture of the world</td>
<td>To go beyond the surface; to enable research objects to become conscious of the Real and to open perspectives for a change towards the Possible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical aim of a research orientation</td>
<td>Production of measurable objective knowledge of reality</td>
<td>Critical reflection and the promotion of consciousness about that what is behind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept of people as Subjects</td>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>Subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept of knowledge</td>
<td>Standardised evidence-based facts produced by scientists to describe the ‘truth’ of the real world</td>
<td>Constructive, negotiated knowledge as processes in a dialogue between theory and practice, between various perspectives of professionals and citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of knowledge</td>
<td>Belief in dominant assumptions and use of the mainstream language of ‘programmes’, decontextualised in order to be measured and evaluated</td>
<td>Dialectic, seeking various perspectives in order to go beyond the surface, holistic professional contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept of social work as a profession</td>
<td>Expertocratic</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept of learning social work</td>
<td>Aiming at ‘competency based professionalism’, collecting a sufficient amount of detailed knowledge of a broad variety of practical fields and related areas</td>
<td>Aiming at comprehensive view and flexible and reflective practice, understanding connections, critical reflection on the source of knowledge and one’s own process of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of education and training</td>
<td>To become a well-functioning system-adequate object of the dominant model of society and economy</td>
<td>To become a fully responsible, autonomously thinking and acting subject who reflects critically on the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality of services</td>
<td>Welfarism, professionalism, managerialism, consumerism</td>
<td>Participatory, community-oriented, critical professionalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the same phenomena. The directions in Table 1 do not correspond to real models but are constructed categories. It rather aims to serve as a map of dialectic directions of social work, which are both constantly present and constantly open.

In accordance with the dichotomies in Table 1, I would like to discuss the current need for critical reflection, which is connected with the aim of subjectivisation, from three perspectives. This starts with an analysis of the dilemma facing critical social work in the institutional context of the new governance of late modern societies. Secondly, I will discuss the chances of achieving critical reflection and subjectivisation in different settings of social work education. Finally, the focus will be on the challenge posed for critical reflection and subjectivisation by the current changes in the Nordic model of the welfare state. These perspectives of social work have been chosen as representing my subjective observations made during various professional experiences. But they also mirror three sub-systems of social work through a cross-European view: current practice, educational arrangements and welfare policy aspects.

Perspective 1. The professional dilemma of critical reflection and subjectivisation

The theoretical ideas of Adorno allow us to see that the self-understanding of some traditions of social work are fairly close to the core ideas of critical theory according to the Frankfurt School. The history of social work has many traditions and examples which share similar purposes, starting from Jane Addams’ community work and the social policy research that took place in Chicago more than 100 years ago and was continued by Paulo Freire and has culminated in the current debates on critical reflection (Fook 2008). Parts of social work can therefore be seen in the long tradition of enlightenment. However, social work cannot only reflect critically on the world around it, with all its destructive structures, but has to discover its own function, its own options and the rebounding consequences of its own daily work. According to a dialectic understanding, each action will either be constitutive of the existing structures or will work towards change.

For Adorno, the main purpose of all socialisation and education should be to support individual processes of becoming subjects and to avoid any return to manipulative political structures. The gap between the Real and the Possible is also relevant when analysing the position of social work as a profession in the capitalism of the late modern era (Dewe and Otto 2005, p. 188). One repeatedly discovers that social work in many countries does not have a societal status in which it can really fulfil its idealistic aims of ‘anti-oppressive practice’, ‘structure-oriented interventions’ or ‘work on the origins of social problems’, for example, rather than mainly dealing with the symptoms that arise from inequality, exclusion and ignorance in society. Although major steps have been taken in the academisation, professionalisation and standardisation of social work, it has not yet achieved an autonomous status in which it can define its own societal function. As Fook (2008, pp. 25–27) and also Karvinen-Niinikoski (2005) state, social work itself is often dominated by other rationalities such as those of management, medicalisation or economics.

The task of critical theory as defined by Adorno thus also means in social work the task of enabling people to become subjects in their own lives. But social work itself is often only on its way towards becoming a subject itself, a responsible,
autonomous and reflective profession that is capable of ‘doing what it wants to do’, and fulfilling its own critical role in society. Social work is increasingly finding itself entangled in neo-liberal and neo-bureaucratic structures of governance which treat people rather as objects. There is a profound discrepancy between the rhetoric of participation and autonomy on the one hand, and manipulation in the interests of the global market economy on the other. The dictating influence of the market economy is extending to local political decisions even in the most remote villages in the world, where welfare services have been cut or privatised. As Brookfield identifies it, the social work dilemma consists of being positioned ‘at the intersection of systemic imperatives and personal commitments’ (2009, p. 294). In a German context, the concept of a ‘double mandate’ (Bönisch and Lösch 1973) has been used for a long time for the same dilemma, constituting the permanent task of social work to balance between the interests of service users and those of the institutions that employ the social workers. Staub-Bernasconi (2008) has suggested the concept of ‘triple mandate’ and added human rights of citizens as a universal and global ‘mandate’ of social work. In many cases only a clear commitment and critical reflection, including self-reflection, can be helpful for discovering a path through the jungle of the interrelated values and contradictory interests of various groups.

The profession of social work wishes to contribute especially to shedding light on social problems and social development as well as reflecting upon them. But there is a clear difference between the ‘expertocratic’ and reflective conceptions of a profession dedicated to casting light on social issues (Dewe and Otto 2005, p. 179). In the hermeneutic theory tradition of German social work, a life-world, or everyday life-oriented approach to social work has been developed by Hans Thiersch (1992, see also Erath 2006, 78 ff.). We still tend to view the situation from the standpoint of the system formed by our professional context rather than the life-world (Habermas 1981) of the people concerned. This is constantly reproducing the gap between social workers and their clients. This phenomenon is not rooted in the personal mistakes of social workers, but due to the immanent contradiction between the different interests which are embedded in social work – and often also in the weak power status of social work as a profession in the hierarchy and sources of power (Fook and Askeland 2006, p. 45). Subjectivisation of social work in the sense of autonomous reflexive practice is vital also for empowering the service users and meeting their needs under such conditions. However, although this dilemma has been known for a long time, social work is increasingly being dominated by the self-limiting possibilities of working structures, often ruled by positivistic rationality such as that of New Public Management. Through these rationalities, the comprehensive and generalistic social science-based working area of social work is increasingly being narrowed down to specified and simplified Tayloristic tasks, which do not touch on the structures of the systems lying behind, but deploy limited competences. The new economic, managerial or medical rationalities offer ‘assumptions and perspectives that explain the world satisfactorily’, as formulated by Brookfield in this issue. Market-formed packages of services, instead of meeting the complexity of citizens’ needs, or standardisation of the working processes in a multi-institutional structure of service management, are just examples of these ‘smoother and more polished façades’ (Adorno 1957) of society, where critical reflection has to go behind the surface.
Perspective 2. (Mis)understanding critical reflection in social work studies

A professional ability for critical reflection should ideally be developed while still studying social work, but as Fook et al. (2006, p. 5) state in their analysis, many authors claim that, especially in the context of higher education, the concepts of reflection and critical reflection are used in confusing ways without defining what they mean. Study programmes vary on an international scale between the ‘integrated research model’ and the ‘specialised field model’, as classified in the case of the Nordic countries by Juliansdottir and Peterson (2003). Independent of the large differences in educational models, the programmes nevertheless embody a lot of reflective content, especially in relation to field placements and personal professional development, and also in the terms of research approaches. Students at many schools produce essays, learning diaries, field reports and research papers in which they have to include ‘reflection’. The learning of critical reflection is much more demanding, however, and is far more than just one task among many others – it could indeed be another perspective for the entire concept of studying social work.

My previous working environment at a German university of applied sciences (Fachhochschule) was more of an application of the ‘specialised field model’. As in most cases of education in social work, there was an endless amount of detailed competences from various fields of social work which the students were required to learn. Therefore seminars devoted entirely to reflection and discussion on social work in general as a profession, not to mention self-reflection or critical reflection, seemed to be ‘a waste of time’ by comparison with courses with simple practice relevance. Similarly, critical discussions about joint concepts of social work education seemed to be irrelevant for teachers, who typically represented other sciences or specialised fields of social work. Especially after the introduction of the new BA-programme, the constant challenge was to find time and motivation for learning opportunities, which would in the new overload programme enable students just to ‘take steps back’ to think (Brookfield 2009).

Often students assume that the part of their studies called ‘reflection’ or ‘critical reflection’ means merely to report something personal related to the topic, to give feedback or to formulate an opinion of one’s own about an issue. Even worse, some students may think that the reflective part should at best repeat the opinion of the teacher, i.e. to reproduce their ideological tendencies. ‘Lack of time’ can also become an assumption that should be analysed critically. Although the students protested a lot against the task of writing a self-reflective learning diary about their subjective learning process during their first year of social work studies, most of them eventually wrote good and quite extensive papers. Some of them stated that this time-consuming task was necessary precisely because of their constant situation of ‘not having time to think profoundly again about what I have already learned’. I have gained the impression that many academic teachers are still actually rooted in the tradition of critical reflection through their own biography, and are able to teach how to reflect critically upon the Real in Western society, but many of them have lost their belief in the Possible, that societal changes can be effected, and therefore they are unable to teach the practical steps of critical reflection in social work.

Practitioners who enter professional education at an adult age and complete it alongside their vocational work could have another, better perspective for critical reflection (Brookfield 2005). In my current position, teaching an ‘integrated research
model’ to adult MA-students of social work at a Finnish university, the situation is quite different from in my previous experience. Many of the students already have broader competences and knowledge than their teachers about various practical fields, the legislations affecting their working organisations and changes in governance. They also carry a lot of experience of life into the class room with them. Immediate struggles between ‘theory and practice’, work and reflection, and academic and practical fields can emerge. The situation can also directly challenge teachers to reflect on their knowledge and way of thinking, since being constantly mirrored in real-world practice. In this particular setting of distance learning for adult students with field experience, aiming at subjectivisation indicates extreme individual and flexible conditions of studying and consequent joint work between students and teachers in planning, constructing and evaluating the programme (Askeland and Payne 2007, p. 172).

According to Brookfield (2009), the learning process arising from reflection begins with an event that points out a discrepancy between assumptions and what happens in real life (the ‘disorienting dilemma’). The next steps mentioned by Brookfield – clear identification of the assumptions, reviewing the evidence for the expected consequences of the assumptions and the adoption of alternative perspectives on the assumptions – are still possible steps to maintain in the learning context. But the fourth step of ‘taking informed action on the basis of the analysis’, i.e. starting to work differently, is the most demanding of all.

Adult students in most cases are highly ‘able to step back from cases and situations and view them from different perspectives’ (Brookfield 2009, p. 294). In our case this step is sometimes hundreds of kilometres, when the students come together for weekend courses or use Internet-based learning facilities. Even more strongly than in their pre-service training, however, these adult social work students realise the discrepancy between critical knowledge, their idea of how they would like to work and how the institutional pressures make them work. They sometimes report, for instance, that ‘Because of new efficiency rules in my job, there is no time to support clients’ processes of becoming subjects. In most cases you just have to make the decisions for them’. What is really needed is the empowerment of social workers towards changes in the structures in their institutions. Also, analytical tools, gained through scientific education, are needed for demonstrating, for example, that it is more effective to support two clients to become subjects of their own lives than to go through 10 cases in the same time without any positive changes in these 10 cases. Adult students realise that they need a strong academic competence as professionals in order to be able to define for themselves how changes will work in the endlessly varying life outside the university. However, academic education is primarily intellectual work, where standardised models often offered to social work are hardly applicable. When we look at the various models for educating social workers and the position of social work in society, it becomes clear that separation of the scientific issues and the professional training, including critical research, in social work education programmes might be fatal for practice. Critical reflection necessitates strong self-confidence and an ability to argue against pseudo-effective working settings. To be able to act upon their critical reflection and promote changes social workers need the autonomous status that follows from academic education.
Perspective 3. Critical reflections upon the current stage of the Nordic model of the welfare state and the subjectivisation of service-users

The intention in this section is to deepen the perspective of critical reflection in the current context of the Nordic welfare states (see also Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005). Brookfield (2009) points out how important it is to discover the assumptions, e.g. that the Western model of society is a democratic and egalitarian one. Belief in the superiority of the Nordic model of the welfare state is still very strong around the world, although significant changes have taken place in its core areas. The Nordic countries can undoubtedly provide examples of societies where economic growth and social equality are better balanced in several aspects. In a global context, the Nordic countries offer significant counter-arguments against some of the more mysterious neo-liberal beliefs: they have some of the most competitive economies in the world but a relatively large public sector, they have high participation of women in the labour market but relatively high birth rates, and they have educational systems that achieve some of the best outcomes in the world but offer an integrative and non-selective system of access to education (OECD 2004, World Economy Forum 2004).

The ‘disorienting dilemma’ (Brookfield 2009) which leads to critical reflection upon belief in the Nordic model is that the Nordic countries are also increasingly moving in the same direction as the other highly competitive areas, due to the growing pressure of the global market economy, or due to the assumption of such a pressure. A good starting point for a critical reflection is to ask whether we are doing what we think we are doing. Or, as Fook and Askeland (2006, p. 41) put it – ‘to compare the theory we actually enact with the theory we may wish to believe we are enacting’. Then, on many dimensions of the assumed egalitarian Nordic welfare state, social inequality is indeed increasing, in citizens’ health, education, access to services and regional development (Saari 2008). In the real world, welfare services and social work are increasingly following a model of selective risk management rather than universalism, which would cover the needs of all people in a preventive sense (Satka et al. 2007).

New managerial governance has taught us not only to count but also to think in economic and technocratic discourses of quality and efficiency, using the criteria of economy (Dewe and Otto 2005, p. 187). This poses a real challenge for all trials aimed at developing critically reflective professionalisation in social work. As pointed out by Karvinen (1996), who has been one of the initiators of the debate on critical reflection in Finland: ‘the professional project of the diversifying welfare state in general seems to carry our contradictory trends of technical managerialism and innovative citizen-centred, reflexive practices’ (Karvinen 1996, p. 1). These contradictions have become even more obvious in the current changes in the Finnish welfare state.

However, as Fook and Askeland (2006) state, this reflection is insufficient if it does not provide information about the direction of change which should be pursued or uncover the contradictions in societal structures (p. 42). Instead of blaming social workers themselves, a new relevant economic view that goes beyond the assumption of ‘limited financial resources’ is needed in order to fight for welfare services of the universal type. This kind of research that bridges economic and social factors is as yet poorly developed, however, and social work and other street-level professional knowledge has not yet been used systematically for influencing policies (see
Närhi 2004). This could be a significant direction in which to develop the expertise of social work.

It is astonishing that the distancing from the Nordic welfare model could take place even though all the relevant surveys show that Finnish citizens support the universal model of welfare policy. In most cases, citizens do not fight openly for such services, even though they are afraid of cuts and privatisation. This may have its roots in the low level of subjectivisation and citizen participation in the field of welfare services, where the citizens tend to be regarded exclusively as objects. The practices of user involvement are just beginning to be developed (e.g. in quality assurance: Kroghstrup 1997), and service systems have not yet been very good at providing participative access for marginalised groups of people themselves (Matthies 2006). Therefore people are seldom enabled to recognise welfare services as ‘their own’ (democratic ownership) or even to be partners in fighting effectively against the neo-liberal cutbacks and privatisations of their services. The professional welfare service systems have obviously forgotten that their legitimacy also depends on the loyalty and active citizenship of service users (Beresford 2001). I regard the poor level of citizens’ participation in the field of welfare services not only as perhaps the weakest dimension of the Nordic welfare state but even as posing a serious risk of its destruction.

In history, however, popular movements such as the labour movement, the peasants’ movement, the women’s movement, the temperance movement and the youth movement have been the subjects and pioneers in the development of Nordic welfare state (Siisäinen et al. 1998, Pestoff 2009). Participation in these movements has provided access to the political elite. The continuity of this historical role of citizens’ organisations as subjects in new developments is now in serious doubt. Established NGOs are no longer participation channels for marginalised people but rather a further source of power for the already powerful elite (Helander 2001). The forms of participation which are now offered as means of activating marginalised people are often merely simulations of participation and are not intended to bring about changes in power structures (see the ‘ladder of participation’ in Arnstein [1969], Matthies [2006]). Adorno’s idea of ‘asking people what they want to be’ has not been applied. In the words of Dewe and Otto (2005), an expertocratic view has been adopted in developing services rather than critical reflection from a citizen’s point of view. The case of the Finnish welfare state shows finally that the subjectivisation of citizens is not only important as a progressive aim of reflective professional practice and a right of modern service users; it is also essential for the future survival of welfare services in general in the era of neo-liberal politics.

Conclusions
The concept of participation should be analysed more critically and I am convinced that the concept of subject as proposed in Adorno’s critical theory could be re-discovered for this purpose. At the same time, users’ involvement is a significant resource for designing services and for local development. Social work and welfare services occupy a distinctive role in the politics of participation and activation. Welfare service professionals can both enable and hinder participation of marginalised citizens. They can strengthen the identity of active citizenship and enable collective action, mutual networks and self-organisation among service users. But
social workers can be instrumentalised for useless programmes of activation in the name of the integration of marginalised people. Some projects allow only limited, harmless types of pre-planned participation, and professionals can in any case discourage people with repressive interventions or with accounts of citizens’ disinterest or incompetence.

The concept of subject in Adorno’s critical theory primarily refers to subjectivisation as a process of consciousness. But it can certainly be applied equally well to the practical level of participation in welfare services, for example. Evers (2006, p. 257) identifies that besides ‘welfarism’, ‘consumerism’ and ‘managerialism’, there emerges a rationality of ‘participationism’ in current welfare services. In this new model, the citizens’ role is radically turned around: social development and welfare services can only be sustainable if they are based on citizens’ own use of power. Service models are locally embedded (instead of being standardised, mainstream models) and the emphasis is on strengthening user and community-based service providers. This rationality is helpful not only for going beyond the rhetoric of citizens’ participation. It also opens up perspectives for a ‘different practice’ in the sense of a participatory model for creating welfare services, a movement from the Real to the Possible.

The participatory aspect of social work clients has always been one of the core components of critical reflection in social work (Fook 2008, pp. 4–5). The critical approach is about people’s consciousness of the power relations in these contexts and about strengthening their ability to act on and in their situation (Fook 2008, p. 17). Debates on ethics, power and professional practice return again and again to the discovery of the inadequate autonomy and participation granted to service users.

References


