II Theoretical Foundations of Practice Research

Margaret Archer’s theory as an approach to social workers’ agency

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One of the elementary questions of social work is related to the agency – that of social workers as well as service users. What kind of possibilities does a person have to influence his/her course of life? Are social workers totally dependent on the traditional conventions and the outer contexts framing their work; how much can they break down and transform the practices?

An approach on the issue is offered by the theory of British sociologist Margaret Archer. In her theory, which belongs to the theoretical tradition of critical realism, the powers of both agents and social and cultural structures are taken into account. Thus the theory separates itself from the reductionist approaches, in which the freedom of individual agents or the deterministic influences of outer structures are emphasized. For Archer, a central starting point of individual’s agency is reflexivity, i.e., a person’s ability to contemplate himself/herself. Thanks to reflexivity, a person is able to have ‘internal conversations’, ponder ‘concerns’ and form ‘agential projects’. According to Archer, social structures and traits of the cultural system have potential powers in relation to peoples’ agential projects; these powers can work as enablements or constraints. On the other hand, an individual can try to review the factors affecting his/her agential projects and find ways of action that facilitate their aims. Although structures exist before a person, they are not unchangeable but transformed – although also reproduced – in social and socio-cultural interaction. In social work practice, this could be connected for example to the question of what kind of ways of meeting service users social workers reproduce or formulate at their work? What kind of style of management is created or reproduced in social work organizations? How is the role of social workers shaped in multi-professional teams?

For social work practitioners and researchers, Archer’s theory produces a model, which challenges them to study an individual’s experiences – internal conversations, concerns and agential projects – as well as interpersonal interaction and the cultural and social structures related to these. Therefore the approach is multifaceted and a central line in it is the interplay between an agent and wider structures. This kind of analysis can help a person to understand the factors affecting his/her life and thus foster change.

In my presentation, I will discuss Archer’s theory by using my doctoral thesis as an example. The study is based on the interviews of experienced social workers, who discuss their views on their work and themselves as social work professionals. I will especially focus on the theoretical and methodological challenges as well as the possibilities of the theory, which the research process highlighted.
The many prepositions of practice research: About, for, in, with and from

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Practice research has emerged as a viable research approach in several professions oriented domains; for example in social work (Salisbury Forum Group, 2011), public administration (Huxham, 2003), strategizing (Whittington, 2006), planning (Watson, 2002), nursing (Reed, 2006), information systems (Goldkuhl, 2011). There are several threads coming together within a practice research approach:

- Consider the empirical field in terms of practices
- Research dealing with topics that are highly relevant to practice
- An interest for what is actually going on in practices (not what people think is going on)
- Inquiries dependent on problematic situations in practices
- An helping and guiding knowledge interest
- Collaboration with and involvement of practitioners in the research process
- There exist many different ways that practice research can be conducted (e.g. action research, design research, evaluation research, case studies)

This proposed paper builds on an earlier described structure and functionality of practice research (Goldkuhl, 2011). Practice research is here considered to consist of a continual interplay between the sub-activities of situational inquiry and theorizing. It aims to contribute to one or more local practice through an inquiry into their practical affairs. It aims also to contribute to general practice through abstract useful knowledge also aimed for the research community. The paper focuses and conceptualises different relations (“prepositions”) between research and practice:

- Research **about** practice (theorizing about practices)
- Research **for** practice (creating knowledge that is valuable for practices)
- Research **in** practice (a close study of practices with access to pertinent data)
- Research **with** practice (collaboration with practitioners in inquiry processes)
- Research **from** practice (knowledge is being built from what is going on in the practices)

These different relations are described and conceptualised within the framework of practice research. A case study on evaluating information systems in social work is used for illustration. This evaluation study was part of a broader research on developing an interpretative, stakeholder based method for evaluating information systems aiming for change and betterment (Lagsten, 2011). The evaluation study was performed at the social welfare services in a Swedish municipality where a preliminary design of an evaluation method was tested and refined parallel with an evaluation a Social Work Information System (SWIS). The evaluated SWIS was an off-the-shelf system from a large Swedish ERP
vendor that had been in use in this practice since 1999. In the studied municipality the system were used by 350 social workers in their daily work practice with case handling. Case handling included; problem solving together with clients, writing field notes, documenting investigations, making decisions on measures, assessing measures and making decisions on placements in institutions and residential care. The study created knowledge valuable for the daily practice of case handling and for the practice of evaluating information system. The research were performed within the social work practice, in collaboration with different stakeholders of the information system (workers, IT-people and management) and furnished with data and knowledge from what was going on in the practice.

A ‘conceptual map’ of practice: a framework integrating theory and practice

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This presentation argues one of the difficulties encountered by UK practitioners working with children at risk is the impoverished relationship that exists between theory and practice. It argues that the integration of theory and practice has not been developed in ways that offer a ‘comprehensive model of professional knowledge’ (Drury Hudson 1997: 37) and analyses a number of factors that contribute to this situation. These include the introduction of managerialist practices and ‘audit culture’ (Munro 2004) within social work, where we see practitioners’ knowledge, skills and professional judgements being replaced by procedures that are target-driven and that promote rule-based, one-size-fits-all response.

A related difficulty can be found in the lack of clarity, consistency and intellectual rigor in the theories that are promoted and in the conceptual language used to describe social work skills and interventions. If we cannot name what we do, we cannot link or integrate practice to theory, or transfer knowledge and skills across different contexts and situations. It is a situation that has resulted in the coverage of social work skills and interventions in academic and practice contexts being seriously neglected and also a situation where new theories continue to be added, but with little attempt to order or to categories these theories in ways that integrate theory and practice and that put forward a coherent map of practice. Hence, in some contexts this has led to the creation of a knowledge pile rather than a knowledge base.

These factors make it difficult to articulate and defend the boundaries of our professional task, roles and responsibilities within social work in general, and in the area of child protection in particular. To address the absence of a coherent map of practice, the presentation describes the key features of a Knowledge and Skills Framework. It shows the integration of theory and practice, or knowledge and skills, by illustrating ‘a users' map of the knowledge-base of professional practice’ in social work (Eraut 1994: 50) - a ‘conceptual
map’ that focuses on practitioners’ knowledge and skills, but that can be creatively adapted to include knowledge and skills that service users (including children/young people), carers bring to the encounter. A central feature of the diagram presented is the importance of critical thinking, analysis and critical reflection/reflexivity (Sheppard 1998) in the area of child protection.

The Modernist and Postmodernist Foundations of Interpreting Social Work Knowledge in Practice

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This paper will explore how modernism and postmodernism provide differing, yet equally significant, foundations for social work knowledge. It discusses how modernist forms of knowledge are crucial in examining social work theory from a perspective of how to make it better – both in terms of researching what models, methods and processes are useful in different situations, and considering how these approaches can be developed in practice. Postmodernist forms of knowledge, on the other hand, explore the frequently uncertain, complex and changing nature of social work practice contexts, and the need to critically interpret theories to fit differing situations. In certain respects, these forms of knowledge appear antithetical, insofar as modernist approaches to knowledge potentially involve a level of empirical rigour and specificity that seems to be questionable in respect to the dynamic and shifting account of social work promoted through postmodernist forms of knowledge. This paper argues, however, that even these differences can be reconciled; and that both modernist and postmodernist approaches to knowledge have important and distinct, roles to play in bringing together social work theory and practice.

What is central to this contention is that a ‘weaker’ theoretical sort of modernist or postmodernist knowledge may be posited. This ‘weaker’ modernism acknowledges that ‘ideal’-type practices are questionable in the complex, changing contexts of social work, especially given that there is some plurality in how moral principles are interpreted in practice contexts. Correspondingly, a ‘weaker’ postmodernism recognizes how most postmodern social work perspectives are grounded in the continuing importance of a relatively defined and stable set of values centred on social justice, respect for persons, beneficence, people’s rights and the need to prevent harm. It appears that these ‘weaker’ modernist and postmodernist forms of knowledge can, therein, be regarded as more closely aligned than it initially seems. ‘Weaker’ modernist approaches can provide research and analysis to move towards good practice in particular situations in a way that corresponds to ‘weaker’ postmodernist approaches that can encourage an addition of subsequent layer of interpretation of this knowledge given the changing nature of these situations.

In terms of thinking about the relationship between knowledge and practice, it therefore appears that in developing robust research for good practice it can be highly
useful to shift between appropriately nuanced modernist and postmodernist ways of thinking. Indeed, it seems that there is a need to move beyond the idea of modernism and postmodernism as a dyadic binary, and explore the intersections between modernist and postmodernist forms of knowledge. The main outcome of bringing the two forms of knowledge together is a greater understanding of the transversal nature of knowledge creation in social work. This includes encouraging the exploration of how practitioners are a source of knowledge through not only of participating in research, but themselves being the creators of knowledge in how it is applied in pluralized and diverse ways. This broadens the scope for thinking about how researchers and practitioners come together to develop models, methods and processes that apply to the actual contexts of social work practice.