

Social Work as Knowledge Work: Knowledge practices and multi-professional collaboration

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Introduction

This paper discusses two issues relevant to the current day social work: (i.) social work as knowledge work, where various forms of creating and using knowledge are a relevant part of the work, and (ii.) multi-professional collaboration, where social work is integrated into or cooperates with other public services in social and health sector. The aims of this paper are to introduce *knowledge practices* as a theoretical concept suitable for analyzing these forms of social work listed above and apply this approach for analyzing a number of cases of novel services of multi-professional nature, where social work is a central part of the practice.

The theoretical background of this paper is in one form of practice research. The contemporary practice turn and practice research in general have been topics of growing interest in research on social work. The approach here introduces knowledge practices as a central theoretical concept for analyzing multi-professional and knowledge intensive social work. Although the conception of knowledge practice has been used in various forms in social theory, the perspective to knowledge practices in this paper follows the way it is discussed by Karin Knorr-Cetina (2001, 2007). It is argued here that there are two central reasons for introducing knowledge practices as a specific type of practices: First, some of the current practice turn theories are unsuccessful in making sense how practices change (Miettinen et al. 2012). Second, the traditional concepts of practice fit rather poorly to the dynamic nature of knowledge intensive work. According to Knorr-Cetina, central characteristic of knowledge work is the open-ended nature of objects of work, which requires the constant re-evaluation and reassessment of the practices of work.

After discussing this theoretical approach, a number of recently developed Finnish cases of service practices are analyzed and the results of these analyses are discussed. The first analysis of these cases consists of a qualitative content analysis of the conceptual models of the selected service practices. These conceptual models of the service practices are developed with a REA-tool, a conceptual tool for modeling practices. This analysis aims at investigating the multi-professional nature of these services and the use of epistemic artifacts (or knowledge tools), such as information systems, for creating and sharing knowledge in the practices. Second analysis is done of questionnaire data collected from the developers of the practices. The questionnaire gathers data from issues such as the actual use the epistemic artifacts as well as other questions relating to the knowledge work and use of knowledge tools. The aim of these analyses are to make sense about the ways in which knowledge creation and use are organized in these cases and what kinds of tools are applied in the cases (i.e., to inquire about the actual knowledge practices within these service practices). The analyses aim at providing relevant information about knowledge practices and the benefits and difficulties related to multi-professional knowledge work in these cases.

Knowledge practices and open-ended objects

The concept of knowledge practices or epistemic practices has been used for denoting a special set of practices relating to knowledge. In some cases, it is used for denoting all kinds of practices concerned with knowledge, such as keeping a diary of incoming and outgoing vehicles in a factory. Other authors, especially Karin Knorr-Cetina, have connected the term with more specific

knowledge tasks relating to knowledge work and knowledge society. Although drawing a demarcation line between the more routine type of knowledge tasks and the knowledge tasks of current day knowledge work is impossible, the emphasis on specific types of activities proposed by Knorr-Cetina is surely worth considering.

The way in which Karin Knorr-Cetina introduces her concept of knowledge practices relates to the open-ended nature of objects. The objects that these practices are directed at are objects of knowledge that are “characteristically open, question-generating and complex” (2001, 181). Her proposal initially comes from the studies of scientific research, but the similar kinds of knowledge work exist in various other forms of activity in current knowledge society. She claims that knowledge practices are a specific type of practices dealing with open-ended objects. Where in routine knowledge tasks the objects of activity are stable and static, such as vehicles coming in and out of the factory, Knorr-Cetina claims that the objects of knowledge work are different. For example, genes as an object of inquiry are open-ended. Researchers do not have complete knowledge about the objects and during the course of inquiry, new knowledge about the objects changes our conception about them and requires that the practices of inquiry, i.e., knowledge practices change.

This can be seen as analogous to the objects of current day social work, such as a structured plan for enhancing the well-being of the client. By following the current line of thinking, the object of the social work is not the client, but the object of work is actually the plan that can be co-produced by clients, social workers and other professionals. The new type of work itself can be challenging in many ways, but even challenging can be the variety of situations that the workers come across. There are clients of multiple problems and the established routines of work might not work. Changing situations might require the practices of work to change. It is also possible that the multiple problems of the client require other professionals to be involved in considering the situation of the client. It has been claimed that “[t]rends in social problems and professional practice make it virtually impossible to serve clients effectively without collaborating with professionals from various disciplines” (Bronstein 2003, 297). As the situations and demands of clients change, the object of work, such as the co-produced future plan, has become open-ended and traditional practices of work have problems dealing with the changing and challenging situations.

More broadly speaking, currently there seems to be a growing need for inter-professional services that can address multiple problems efficiently and it has become a growing tendency in the Finnish development of new social and health services. Partially, the changing society creates new kinds of problems and challenges to social work to which it needs to adapt. Also, the collaboration of various professions, such as social work and different kinds of health services, brings about new challenges. These together require the development of new kinds of ways of organizing the work and tasks for the exchange and creation of knowledge, i.e., knowledge practices.

Multi-professional collaboration

From the perspective of social work, social workers have in many cases worked with professionals from other disciplines f. ex. when working in clinics, prisons and hospitals. Therefore interdisciplinary work practices might be familiar and existent in social work in some sense. It seems, though, that the increase in developing and demanding multi-professional practices relate to trends in social problems and professional practice. There have been attempts to develop models for interdisciplinary collaboration (Bronstein 2003) as well as practical solutions to enhance collaboration between different professions.

In Finnish social and health services development, there has been a growing trend towards the development of boundary-crossing and multi-professional services, where different kinds of professionals are co-producers of the service. This is partially an answer to the client demands, but

also an organizational attempt to enhance the performance of the produced services (f. ex. cost efficiency). This kind of change and development of new services bring about new challenges to the organization of the work. It requires new kinds of practices for inter-professional collaboration as well as knowledge practices that meet the new kinds of situations of co-working with clients and sharing knowledge across organizations.

This kind of change can be far from an easy task to achieve. Traditions and existing practices can be difficult to change. Different professions cherish their expertise and new kind of collaboration and knowledge-sharing can be seen as a threat to their own expertise and profession. There are also positive examples of successful implementations of multi-professional practices, where social workers co-produce the service together with various other professionals. These are examples of “working outside established organizational practices, negotiating the nature of the task, and coordinating responses” (Edwards & Kinti 2010, 126).

Case Studies of knowledge practices and multi-professional collaboration

The case studies consisted of 23 novel service practices of various kind within the social and health field. All of these practices were modeled into a pilot version of REA-tool for modeling and evaluating practices (<https://pilotointi.innokyla.fi>) (Koivisto & Pohjola 2011). The REA-tool has been developed in the Innovillage project (2009-2013). In the tool, users can construct a general model of the practice (Implementation model), plan the implementation process and implement the model in different sites, and evaluate the outcomes and changes the practice generates. The 23 investigated practices were selected from a total of ca. 270 modeled practices in the REA-tool with the following criteria:

- The practices have clear indication of multi-professional collaboration.
- Social work has some kind of role in the practice.
- There are clear indications of knowledge practices in the implementation model of the practice.

All of these practices have been developed in different kinds of development projects that were ongoing in the year 2011 and the service practices were modeled into the REA-tool during the year 2011. The implementation models of practices consist of the following information about the practice:

- The name of the practice and other general information about the practice (developers, contact information etc.)
- The purpose of the practice what it is developed for (f. ex. providing the early prevention of different social, health and mental health problems in maternity clinics)
- Detailed descriptions of the actors of the practice (clients, professionals, organizational personnel such as managers, etc.), tasks what different actors conduct in the practice, requirements and required resources in order for the practice to function, and rules and other principles governing the practice.
- A process model of the practice.

Analyses of the practices

First, each of the 23 implementation models of the practices was content analyzed. The content analysis was conducted by using CAT Coding Analysis Toolkit, which is a free internet service of the Qualitative Data Analysis Program (QDAP) (<http://cat.ucsur.pitt.edu/>). In the analysis, every implementation model of practice was independently coded by two coders. After the independent coding processes, the coders went through the coded data code-by-code and every disagreement in coding was negotiated and mutually agreed code was selected.

The data was analyzed with four main categories of codes indicating the different aspects of multi-

professional work and the knowledge practices (see table 1.). Because of the limitations of the used data, a questionnaire was sent to the developers of these practices, where the respondents were asked to specify more in detail how work is organized, what kinds of tasks the actors do, and how and for what purposes different tools are utilized. The questionnaire aimed at further enhancing the researchers' understanding about the knowledge tasks and used artifacts, the organization of multi-professional collaboration and the role of social work in the practices. The results of the questionnaire, including both lickert-type questions and open questions, were content analyzed together with the results of the analysis of the implementation models.

Main categories	Used codes		
The role of social work	<i>Social work is central to the service</i>	<i>Social work is co-producer of the service</i>	
The type of multi-professional collaboration	<i>Co-production</i> - work is done in collaboration (as in teams etc.)	<i>Distribution of work</i> - work tasks are distributed among different professionals	<i>Both co-production and distribution</i>
Knowledge tasks	<i>Knowledge collection</i> - f. ex. knowledge is collected from clients situation	<i>Knowledge sharing</i> - f. ex. knowledge is distributed among different professionals	<i>Knowledge production</i> - knowledge is constructed through some kind of interaction
Knowledge artifacts	<i>Forms</i> - client forms (paper or e-forms) - questionnaires - structured interviews	<i>Internet technologies</i> - Social media - Web-based solutions	<i>Other</i> - Other types of tools and artifacts

Table 1. Codes and categories

Results

The 23 models of service practices in the analysis consisted of various types of services. There were models of services for child welfare, welfare for drug abusers, early prevention models for maternity clinics, few to mention. In 10 practices of the 23, social work was central to the service. In these models, the service would be organized within social care or social work would be an essential part of the practice. In the remaining 13 practices, social work was more in the role of co-producer and in some of these social workers would participate only when the client's case would benefit from social workers' participation and engagement.

Multi-professional collaboration: All of the analyzed practices consisted of some kind of multi-professional collaboration. Out of the 23 models of practices, 6 models were developed as a co-production service, where the work tasks were conducted in collaboration and they usually involved at least a team of two different professionals.

“XXX-team is a multi-professional team of at least two professionals. The professionals can be social workers supported with child welfare professional or occupational therapist...” (Model 1.)

In 7 of analyzed models of practices, collaboration was mainly organized as the distribution of work tasks among different professionals. In these practices, there was not evident co-productive element

in the sense of working together. Although different professionals interacted with each other, the work tasks were mainly conducted individually.

“Welfare for intoxicants professional located in the health center is a resource for the other health center professionals. Health center professionals’ task is to recognize what kinds of patients would benefit from the help of the welfare for intoxicants work” (Model 16.)

Remaining 10 practice models had both types of collaboration. They had both the elements of co-production and the distribution of work tasks.

“If a family has a problem that requires the help of several professionals, the family worker together with the family members can decide to use the multi-professional team [...] The team together with the family can decide, what kind of help they require and which one of the professionals will be working with the family to provide the needed help” (Model 10.)

In practices where social work was not central to the service, the type of collaboration was either distribution of work or had both distribution and co-production elements. Only one of the 13 practices where social work is merely a co-producer of the service was modeled as multi-professional co-production practice. On the other hand, four of the six practices having a co-production model were those having social work as the central element of the practice. It is questionable, though, whether this is an indication of anything specific to social work centered practices or merely accidental and relative to the limited number of analyzed cases.

Knowledge practices: The knowledge practices were analyzed from two dimensions: the types of knowledge tasks central to the practice model and used knowledge tools or artifacts. In this analysis, the focus was on the knowledge tasks central to the practice. Many of the models described various knowledge tasks, but here the interests were on the knowledge tasks that bring about new kinds of ways of doing knowledge work, that is new knowledge practices introducing novel forms of work or novel knowledge tools.

The largest type of knowledge tasks in the practice was knowledge collection. In total 13 of the modeled practices introduced a tool or a method for collecting knowledge of the client’s situation. Typical tools used in knowledge collection were forms, structured interviews and questionnaires. Only three of the 13 practices used other kinds of artifacts and ways to collect knowledge. Some practices also used forms for the purposes of sharing knowledge. Clients filled a form and the information was distributed to relevant professionals.

“XX is a semi-structured interview method for social workers [...] which is available as a paper form and as a computer version. [...] Professionals use it to assess the type of support the young clients need” (Model 1.)

Different types of web technologies were also utilized in some of the practices. Two practices used internet technologies to share knowledge with clients and professionals. Three practices were centered on internet technologies for interactive knowledge production, where clients and professionals both were active in the knowledge production.

“The users should have courage to anonymously write about their situation to the professionals in the [web-based] service [and] professionals should have ability to recognize and negotiate the needs of the client, and direct them to the most appropriate communal service” (Model 22.)

In connection with the role of social work, only one of the practices, where social work was central,

utilized internet technology as the central knowledge artifact. None of these practices where social work was central had knowledge production as the typical knowledge task. On the other hand, half of these practices relied on knowledge collection and used forms as the typical knowledge artifact.

Discussion

It can be said that the multi-professional model of working with the clients can be seen as a kind of knowledge practice, i.e., an organization of work to tackle the open-ended nature of the object of work. The engagement of different professions into a practice can help to manage with the various situations that social work and other social and health service professionals confront in their daily work.

From the perspective of deployed knowledge artifacts, especially the social work-centered practices were on the conservative side. The tools were mostly utilized for gathering knowledge about the clients' situation. This knowledge was then used for making decisions about the appropriate actions and services that would suite the client's needs.

From the perspective of developing and innovating new kinds of ways of work in collaboration, the modeled service practices in this study were mainly focused on launching inter-professional practices. Few of the practices were actually focused on introducing new types of tools and epistemic artifacts to enhance the collaboration between professionals. Even more, if we see the object of activity of social work as something else than the client, there were only a few knowledge practices that were directly created for enhancing the participatory role of the clients. Typically the participation and involvement of the client relied on their active presence in the assessment of their situation and in the decision making of appropriate services and goals.

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