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RESEARCH, KNOWLEDGE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WORK THE FINNISH EXAMPLE

*Mirja Satka**

This presentation describes very briefly the current situation in the Finnish social work, and the current status of the Finnish social work profession. The main emphasis is on what has made these Finnish developments possible, and what are the future hopes and wishes that social work experts have.

When I started my career in social work in the early 1970s, the main route to social work profession was a professional BA degree in a separate school of social work under the University of Tampere. At that time there was only a little research in social work and about social work, and it was common in academia and among academics to consider social work research less interesting than e.g. research in sociology or social policy. The status of the few social work research was low. Social work as a university discipline did not exist, and very few people, if any, had specialised in social work research. Today the situation is very different.

The purpose of this presentation is first, to describe very briefly the current situation in the Finnish social work, and second, I will briefly talk about the current status of the Finnish social work profession; and finally, the main emphasis is on

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what has made these Finnish developments possible, and what are the future hopes and wishes that social work experts have.

The current status of Finnish social work discipline

From the point of view of the Finnish social work discipline, it is important to note the following recent developments:

- 1) Social work became an independent academic discipline since 1999, and has tenure professor's post, other professors' posts, lecturers' posts, etc., in six Finnish Universities, who organise social work education. Thus, the academic status of Finnish social work discipline is nowadays comparable e.g. to sociology, political science, education in the mentioned universities;
- 2) About 250 students complete a MA degree social work as their major including both a concentration on research and on professional practice in their studies (which has been also the qualification for a social work professional since the early 1980s, i.e. MA in social work);
- 3) Every year 20-30 social workers complete a doctor's degree in social sciences with a social work specialisation (i.e. a PhD in social work). The number is partly due to a national (4 years full-time paid studying after a MA) Graduate School in Social Work and Social Services financed by the Finnish Academy since the mid 1990s;
- 4) The Finnish Society for Social Work Research was established 1998 to promote social work research in co-operation with practice and academia. The number of both academic and professional publications and articles in the discipline of social work is expanding year after year, e.g. the Society of Social Work Research has established a yearbook of social work research and a more practically oriented professional journal, and since 1993 there has existed a Finnish Research Journal of Social Work and Social Policy called Janus.

The status of social work profession

From the point of view of the social work profession, it is important to note the following recent developments, which can be partly seen as a consequence of the preceding, successful developments in social work research and knowledge production since the early 1980s:

- Last year, 2000, there was established a professional licentiate's degree in social work. It is a four-year part-time degree for experienced social

workers with MA to achieve a professional specialisation in one of the following fields: social work with children and youth, social work with people living in the margins of society, or social work in rehabilitation;

- 2001 there is under establishing A system of local Centres of Excellence in Social Welfare. It consists of 9 local centres, which cover the whole country, and the aim of these centres is to build a wide, local net of expertise in the field of social work and social services and to link together
- the local social services and social workers (including both private and public organisations)
- the local university department of social work and the local department of early education,
- local research institutes (e.g. in family studies, social gerontology, childhood studies), and
- polytechnics who organise education in social services, and early education

The purpose of the local Centres of Excellence in Social Welfare is

- a) to help to link research, practical developing of social work, early education and social services, and social work education (the basic MA education and the specialising professional education in particular) into a more productive interaction;
- b) to improve the quality of social services from the local point of view, to develop evaluation of social services;
- c) to create new skills and know-how (or excellence) in practice and for practitioners so that practitioners themselves have a considerable input in its making, and
- d) to develop knowledge production and new forms of research (e.g. evaluations of the present practices) in close connection to social work practice.

Why are these developments possible in social work practice?

Today it is possible to argue: Finnish social work expertise has been taking long steps forward over the last 15 years. We have seen how social workers' daily practices have changed and are changing in many respects. In this presentation I want to pay attention particularly into changes in research, knowledge production

and writing about social work practice. Why have these developments in social work practice become possible? It is the active social workers who in the first place have made the positive developments possible by making and taking practical research and knowledge production in different forms as part of their daily work.

Why and how has knowledge production in practice become possible for social workers to become active in knowledge production and research?

1. Research skills have been part of the basic education in social work since the late 1970s. Social workers learn during their University studies how to do research in practice in addition to the practical training in social work methods, theories, etc.
2. The increasing social work research has strengthened the image and status of the profession in outsider's eyes. It has also helped professionals to create more positive attitude towards research, and it has increased efforts towards research-based social work.
3. The individualisation of people's lives and the variety of the so called new social problems, like long-term unemployment, poverty in cities, aged rural communities, etc. underlines the importance of locally produced, and case by case relevant knowledge for the daily use of social workers.
4. Our understanding about what is valid knowledge for social work practice has changed: relevant knowledge for social work needs to be built beginning from social work practice, NOT beginning from the academic research only. However, this understanding considers knowledge produced by the academic research also necessary for social work practice. Since social work is the profession, who has most experience working with people's social problems, the locally valid knowledge for social workers cannot be produced without their experiential knowledge. Social workers' knowledge from work needs to be combined with the knowledge academic research in social sciences is producing.

Thus, I am not saying that Finnish social workers are doing academic research at work! Their knowledge production takes often place when they develop documentation of their work in new ways. When they write, e.g. stories about their work experiences to each other, or when they co-work with researchers. There are many ways how a social worker is an active participant in the local knowledge production. In Finland we are also active in discovering and developing new ways of knowledge production appropriate in social work practice.

Research-oriented practitioners are by no means the whole truth why the Finnish social work developments have become possible. In addition, needs to be mentioned the educational policies implemented by the Ministry of Education, and also the reorganisation of the Finnish welfare state.

Over the last two decades Finnish higher education has been very much

academised; most professional fields have nowadays a Master's degree as the basic level of education. Sometimes the academisation of the professional education in social work has happened even against the will of some Universities.

The 1990s reorganisation of the Finnish welfare state has emphasised the role of social workers. They have been considered important since social workers are the flexible instrument in relation to people's individually varying needs and problems. This emphasis has provided social work discipline and profession new resources by the state. The new resources to social work have been part of the reshaping of the Finnish welfare state in the shade of the 1990s economic depression (which was long and deep in Finland) and globalising economy. In the reorganisation of the Finnish welfare state, the responsibility of the continuity and quality of local social services has been increasingly shifted to social workers. The state has begun to support the autonomy of professions, and to build a new kind of control of expertise. Social workers are, e.g., increasingly responsible to evaluate their practice and prove that they are effective in their daily practices. This is also one reason why social workers need to develop new ways of documenting their work. Furthermore, the promotion of a highly qualified education and research in social work can be seen as attempts to increase the regulation of the social work profession in new ways, and thus, it has become a necessity that social workers have good skills for research and rely on new information technology.

The importance of research for developing social work practice

Today it possible to argue that social work research has been and continues to be a very important influential factor in developing new social work practices, and vice versa, social work practice has become a very essential context for research and practice defines also research. One conclusion of the Finnish situation is that only now, at the beginning of the new century, the real social work research has become into existence. By that I mean research that is relevant for practice and takes also place either in actual social work practices or in close connection with them.

One can also argue, how without research activities and proved competencies in research and knowledge production the new resources and opportunities provided by the state, would not have come available. On the other hand, the new developments have also been a result of constant struggling for better possibilities in practice, and whenever there has been a chance, there has also been active social work students and professionals who have taken advantage of the new possibilities, who have put it into practice, etc. To my mind, both the social workers' competencies in research and knowledge production, and their eagerness to respond positively to the new professional challenges offered to them, refers back to the academic basic education, and doctoral programs in social work started in the 1980s.

A simple but noteworthy example of the recent changes in the Finnish academic vocabulary is that we often prefer to use the concept of social work expertise instead of professionalism, or related words, when we discuss about the knowledge, know-how and skills of a social worker - or about the knowledge, know-how and skills needed in social work profession. This expertise can be general or specialised, however, specialised does not mean a narrow specialisation in the same sense as we see e.g. in medicine. In our understanding this specialisation has to involve always a broad general knowledge and understanding about the person in his or her social situation, and in addition, skills for research and knowledge production, a deeper understanding in a particular problem area e.g. social work with children. In practice this means

- good skills of communication (respecting, listening and negotiating with the child) which take into account the child's subordinate status in relation to the social work professional in the situation;
- competence to produce knowledge
- competence to integrate many kinds of knowledge (research is only one form of them; other important form of knowledge is based on professional experience) in solving a child's problem situation, to consider various possibilities of interpreting the problem situation and to take into account their probable consequences to the child and others involved.

Future hopes

So far we have not yet seen many influences the knowledge from social work practice has made in the Finnish social policies. In spite, we are very much looking forward the new Centres of Excellence in Social Services together with the highly specialised and skilled social work professionals (e.g. those with professional licentiate degrees), and the rapidly developing information technology. Together they might soon create a co-ordinated system of knowledge production, an organisation of social reporting constantly also utilised by the Ministry of Social Affairs in planning of the national social policies. Over the forthcoming five years we will see whether this is the case, or whether implementing in national social policies by the means of local social work knowledge remains an over-optimistic wish.

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