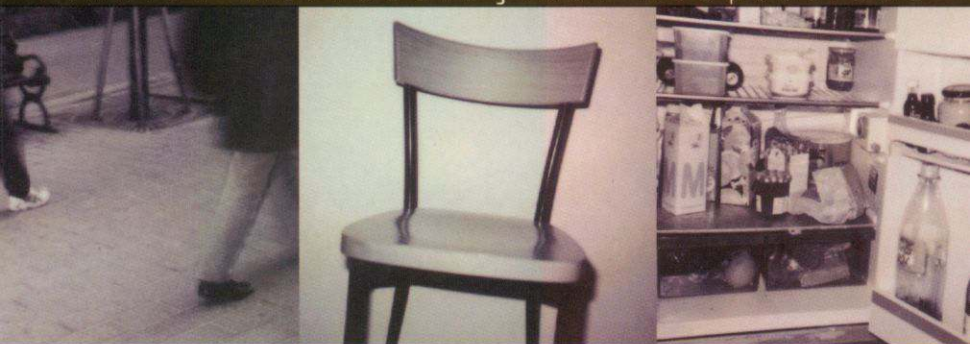


RECONSTRUCTING

# Social Work

RESEARCH

Finnish Methodological Adaptations



**SoPhi**

Synnöve Karvinen, Tarja Pösö & Mirja Satka (eds.)





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# SoPhi

University of Jyväskylä 1999

SoPhi publishes social sciences at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and it is located at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy. It provides a forum for innovative studies in social policy, sociology, political science and philosophy. SoPhi publishes 10–15 titles per year, both in Finnish and in English. Manuscripts are selected for publication on the basis of expert opinion.

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## AN INVITATION

The purpose of this book is to provide the international reader with an idea of what social work is actually like in Finland. Until now, most studies in this area have been published in Finnish and have therefore been largely restricted to a Finnish audience. By overcoming this linguistic constraint, we naturally hope to open up the debate to a wider academic and professional audience.

Having only been established in its present form in the 1990's, it is precisely this kind of response and challenge from social work researchers abroad that is necessary in Finnish social work's search for its own identity and in determining the course of its future development.

Research and the production of knowledge have become essential areas of expertise in the late 1990's. Ever since the commencement of social work training in 1942, courses on research methods have been an integral part of teaching curricula. However, very few social workers have had the opportunity to apply their scientific skills in their work, indicating that training in research methodology and methods has often proved to be of little immediate practical value. Research skills were seriously reviewed in social work training in the early 1980's, when, for the first time, the majority of social work training was provided at the M.A. level. As part of (this educational reform, it was emphasised that the M.A. degree should equip each social worker with both professional and research skills. The M.A. degree also provided social workers with the opportunity to continue their education in doctoral programmes, becoming doctors of Social Science. At that time,

doctoral training was carried out within the discipline of Social Policy in most universities. However, this changed in the 1990's with the establishment of a doctoral programme in social work, supported by the Academy of Finland. More recently, a programme for receiving a professional licentiate degree in social work has been suggested. Planned jointly by those universities (offering degrees in social work, its aim would be to deepen the knowledge base of social work in a way which, on a postgraduate level, would combine relevant practical themes with the analytic approach provided by research.

In conceptualising the current developments, we also discuss the phase leading up to the present situation.

## The development of social work education

Finnish social work research and education as part of social policy has been an interesting exception in the European setting. It was created during the late 1970s reform of higher education. The idea was to professionalise the discipline, thus making the related occupations scientific. This entailed raising the education of social workers to the graduate level and identifying its 'true' scientific nature. No one suggested that social work, which was producing little scientific research, could have become an independent academic discipline. Social workers were trained to be Masters of Science, with socio-scientific education and social policy as their main subjects (e.g. Satka 1985).

The academisation of social work education produced new professorships of social policy. Since no one involved in social work research was qualified to fill these posts, social politicians and other men became the gatekeepers of knowledge production in this female dominated field. Initially, their attitudes toward the challenge posed by social work education and research were inconsistent (e.g. Matthies 1990). On the other hand, they justified the educational solution by arguing that norm-based assistance was no longer an adequate response to the problems of social insecurity. According to them, what was needed was social work that was capable of tailoring to individual, familial, regional and community specific needs. They believed that social policy had a lot to offer to social work (e.g. Sipilä 1983, 159). On the other hand, social politicians opposed the academisation of social work, which



they expressed through strictly criticising it, especially during the mid 1980s. In the discussion, which lasted for several years, the practices and occupational traditions of social work were identified mainly with the content of vocational training, and the position of the teachers and students of social work was below science education in the university hierarchy (see Satka 1997).

During the 1980s, researchers and social workers were in the foreground of the training of social workers. Acquiring competence in social work practices was regarded as being of secondary importance. The distinctive characteristics and experiential knowledge of social work were ignored in the reform. The gatekeepers, who had come from outside the field, were unaware of the resources contained, for example, in tacit knowledge, everyday knowledge and the theory-in-use of social work, which have only been thematised in research stemming from the distinctive tradition of social work. Aila-Leena Matthies, who has analysed the academisation of social work (1990, 35-36), sums up the consequences of this process for social work: "The occupational tradition (of women) has been seen as an element incongruent with the traditional (masculine) scientific ideal – as something that needs to be shaken off when one begins to establish 'real', scientific social work. Although pure occupational practice in itself could not be the basis of scientific social work, in the process of scientification a lot of such elements have probably been thrown away that could have been scientifically refined."

The scientification of social work has influenced the self-understanding and work organisation of the representatives of the field. When social scientists, together with the bureaucrats of the welfare state, began to define social workers and other representatives of the field as actors occupying a lower hierarchical position in the production of basic social work knowledge, they simultaneously defined who had the right to interpret and 'name' the surrounding reality, and what the presuppositions of this activity were. As the representatives of social work did not meet the qualification criteria of the academic world, they were not regarded as competent producers of scientific knowledge. In these force fields and under the pressure of several instances of Otherness, the self-understanding and internal culture of social work took a silent, malleable and invisible form. Indeed, Ulla Mutka (1998) discovered a kind of 'culture of silence' in her interviews with the

experts of practical social work. Her interpretation of the events following the academisation of social work education is quite interesting. Mutka analyses this process as one of professionalisation, from the viewpoint of both social workers and theoretical experts, interpreting it as a demarcation strategy of an academic, male-dominated profession aimed at constructing a hierarchy, and maintaining distance from and control over the female-dominated profession of social work.

Thus, in the attempts to turn social work into an academic discipline, the development of social work as both a field of learning and as a profession remained half-finished. Social work research did not get off to a good start either. Social scientists were poorly equipped to develop social work in the same direction in which other professions have developed: into a multidisciplinary field of learning with two equal sides of expertise – the practical and the theoretical. Another significant problem was the fact that social work education was unable to produce social workers who possessed a deep analytical view of the fundamental aspects of their field, let alone a strong sense of professional self-esteem. The hidden curriculum of a student of social work was characterised by Otherness, neglect of the core questions of social work, and a fair degree of denial of its practical relevance.

## The making of an independent discipline

The reshaping of the Finnish welfare state in the wake of the recession and the globalisation of the economy in the 1990s, the fact that knowledge production has become an integral part of expertise in post-industrial society, and the concurrent increase in long-term unemployment and the fragmentariness and unpredictability of people's everyday lives are likely to be the reasons why the state has begun to support the autonomy of professions and the construction of a new kind of control of expertise. Simultaneously, the academic teachers and professors of social work have begun to strengthen social work as an independent subject and field of study.

Finnish social work has indeed begun to stand on its own. The position of professions is strengthening as a result of both the dismantling of centralised administration and the transfer of the executive power in welfare politics to the local level. Consequently, a new kind of

responsibility for the continuation and quality of services has been shifted onto the shoulders of social work professionals. This can be seen in attempts to increase the regulation of the social work profession and establish a high-quality vocational and scientific education.

On the other hand, the necessity of social work's ability to stand on its own is connected with pluralised, complex and contingent circumstances, which have begun to question the capability of traditional scientific knowledge to find answers to or even identify unique questions. Both the increase in the interdependence of social processes and the establishment of reflexivity as a methodological principle that guides professional action have also had their effect. It is no longer possible to control people through predefined norms or theoretical knowledge. The idea of being able to control and direct the present and the future, which is characteristic of industrial modernity, has been challenged (Karvinen 1996; Mutka 1998, cf. Beck et al. 1995).

The ability to work in a complex, contingent and pluralistic world requires constant reflection on one's relationship with the surrounding reality. It is not sufficient that this relationship is developed at the level of individual reflection. In the social division of labour, professions charged with particular tasks have both a right and a responsibility to maintain their existence, self-understanding and social relations. Social work, too, must develop a logic and mechanism of its own, based on its perceptions and specific understanding of the surrounding conditions and social work's place and role within them. This mechanism helps to get in touch with the processes that shake the foundations and professional culture of its sphere of action. In the construction of future society, a connection with the professional tradition and its cultural system is of vital importance. This kind of 'internal logic' cannot be produced outside of experiences created in action. On the other hand, its establishment is necessary for the construction of the identity of social work in an increasingly complex world. It presupposes a new kind of reciprocal, evaluative and communicative relationship between different ways of knowing and types of knowledge. In a rapidly changing world, the *modus operandi* of social work is created in practical action both temporally and locally. Professional and scientific expertise are no longer isolated islands. Instead, they are intertwined and mutually supportive resources of action. A new kind of spirit of dialogue has replaced the lost belief in great stories and projects. Reformulating

the internal principles of social work seems to have become a precondition for the continuing social relevance of the discipline (Satka 1998). In the following, we discuss the ways in which this change has begun to manifest itself in Finnish teaching and research training of social work.

## The profile of social work research and this book

The 1990s is the decade of the blossoming and autonomisation of Finnish social work research. The results of both the Masters degree, initiated in previous decades, and the academic qualification and research programmes for experienced field workers are visible not only in practical work – in the formation of an investigative relationship to workers' professional practices – but also, and more importantly, in the increasing number of doctorates. Social work research has become independent, has found its own substance, and established its own methodological conceptions as well as its own research projects and publishing activity, which have continued to develop and grow.

Due to its short academic history, Finnish social work research is best known for doctoral and licentiate's dissertations, as well as Masters' theses. However, as the number of social work researchers with doctoral honours has increased, there have been more and more research projects connected with the development of professional practices, special expertise and education. Challenges in the near future include the development and evaluation of expertise in social work and social services, as well as an improvement in the quality of basic research on the ever changing subject matter of social work, its practices and history.

Social work research and research training are mainly the responsibility of the six universities offering degrees in social work, together with a Swedish language unit at the University of Helsinki. In addition to this, many organizations in the social sector have notable research and development projects. For social work, the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) is the most important of the governmental research facilities. The municipal social sector produces a considerable amount of research of its own, especially in larger cities, and the university social centers function as forums for research co-operation between universities, municipalities and organisations.

According to Jorma Hänninen (1990), the research of the 1990s stands out in the brief history of Finnish social work research as belonging to a period of realism. It has been characterised by the striving of social work towards independence and the will to stand on its own. There have been attempts to conceptualise and reflect upon the self-understanding of the profession and discipline through, among other things, historical research (Satka 1995; Arnkil 1991), contemporary analyses and expert research (Mutka 1998; Karvinen 1996; Eräsaari R. 1995). On the other hand, professional practices, professionalisation and the stages and directions of disciplinary history have been made visible (Karvinen 1993; Satka 1995). There has also been realistic and constructionist research on the development and evaluation of professional practices and working environments (Granfelt 1998; Heino 1997; Jokinen & Juhila & Pösö 1995; Pohjola 1994; Rostila 1997). Other research projects involve the visualisation of new practices and the evaluation of old ones, including, for example, projects that deal with policies related to children, families and the elderly (Bardy 1996; Forsberg 1998; Forssén 1998; Koskinen 1994), projects aimed at developing social services (Kröger 1997; Rauhala 1996; Matthies 1994; Sipilä 1997), and research on bureaucracy and leadership (Eräsaari, L. 1995; Niiranen 1994; Mäntysaari 1991). Evaluative and developmental research on social work teaching is also gaining popularity (Borgman 1998; Clarke 1998).

This book aims at providing a view of the topical themes and methodologies in contemporary Finnish social work research. What is important here are the choices the social work researchers have made in order to analytically capture the multiple nature of social work. It has clearly not been sufficient to merely study social work as a topic. Rather, and more importantly, research methodologies and strategies which capture the professional, interactive, social and ethical particularities of social work must also be developed. However, we cannot refer to a set of research methodologies and methods that are specific only to social work, rather, we must speak about the more or less relevant ways in which they have been adapted to the practice of social work research. Such adaptations are contained in the main focus of this book.

It is impossible to cover all of the areas of innovative social work research in Finland in a single book. The emphasis is on qualitative research, which also describes the main lines of research outside of the context of this book. The approaches vary, but the contributors

share a common interest in uncovering the methods and perspectives of studying the past (Part I), difficult objects in social work (Part II) and daily professional practices (Part III). There are, however, several other important themes, adaptations and writers missing from this collection. Unfortunately, it was impossible for all of the researchers of social work to respond to the invitation to participate in the creation of this book; and some of those who did had to give up their contributions during the editorial process. As a result, this book may not be read as a comprehensive representation of Finnish social work research, but rather as a representative description of the topicalities in social research methodologies and methods in the late 1990's. This is analysed in greater depth in Part IV.

As the editors of the book, we owe our thanks to all the contributors (and also to those who did not manage to finish their articles). Special thanks go to the Union of Social Workers, which financially made it possible to publish this book. The publication of this book celebrates the work that the Union has done for the past 50 years to promote professional social work in Finland. In addition, the book is the pioneer publication of the Association of Social Work Research, established in 1998. We hope that it will be the first of many publications, as the field of social work would certainly benefit from textual expressions. It is likely that this book would not exist without the European Association of Schools of Social Work, which is holding its conference in June, 1999, in Helsinki, Finland. We are honoured to have been chosen by the Programme Committee to edit this book, which hopefully serves its purpose of informing the conference participants, as well as anyone else interested in social work research, about Finnish traditions in this area. Last but not least, warm thanks are also due to Juha Virkki, as representative of the publishing house, and to Elisabeth Moulton, translator, both of whom made this book possible.

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I

TIME, CHANGE, SOCIAL WORK



*Mirja Satka*

## CONCEPTUAL PRACTICES IN THEORISING THE SOCIAL WORK PAST FOR THE FUTURE

This article<sup>1</sup> is an introduction to the approach and method that has been developed in several studies over the past years in order to trace the conceptual and practical history of Finnish poor relief and social work during their modernisation.<sup>2</sup> That is, when they were transformed from a voluntary activity based on local knowledge into textually co-ordinated, and thus, unified professions. In comparison with most of the western European nations the Finnish industrial modernisation took place relatively late, and once it began, it spread rapidly in towns, but was slower in spreading in the countryside, where about 88% of Finns lives at the turn of the century. Undoubtedly, Finland was at that time one of the most rural European peripheries, a country under Russian rule until 1917. For example, it is only as recently as the 1950s that the percentage of the population earning their income from primary production, i.e. agriculture and forestry, diminished to under 50% of the vocationally active population (e.g. Kerkelä 1982, 35).

The particular aim of my research work has been to discover the development of prevailing conceptual practices from the first statutes of poor relief to the emergence of the Finnish professional doctrine of social work. This development took place by the end of 1950s,

although the local variations in a rural and late industrialised country were considerable. As a symbolic sign of this modernisation one might mention that, for example, the concept of ‘social worker’ did not become accepted as a term unifying the Finnish actors of the social field in certain tasks until the 1950s.

When I started my research, there existed very little research on the history of Finnish social work, and in this sense the field was free for an innovative effort. Hence, this article describes one possibility of investigating the history of social work, or changes in textually intermediated ideas in connection with practice, although the approach is not limited to that. It can also be applied in studying various contemporary institutional practices, from which it originally derives (e.g. Campbell & Manicom 1995; de Montigny 1995; Swift 1995). In light of my experience as a lecturer and researcher of social work, when planning the study and choosing the approach, I wanted to work out a method that helps to overcome the contradictions between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in social work in interpreting its modernisation. My intention was not to write a traditional history of ideas, but rather a functional history; a history of how discourses and practical action have been interwoven and mediated to one another throughout the process of Finnish modernisation.

## Discussion about theorising social work

I targeted my research on the written works and lives of the pioneers of Finnish social work. This point of view, which begins from acting subjects, can in part be considered as a response to the contemporary challenge to social sciences in general to build bridges which mediate over the traditional split of theory vs. practice. This challenge needs to be met not only in investigating today’s practices empirically, but also, and perhaps primarily, in theoretical and historical research. This is important, in that as a social work academic I consider my aim to understand and reconstruct a world that is actual and functioning – not only the world that is available in textual documents or only ‘in theory’.

In evaluating my research project, Haluk Soydan (1996, 144), who has researched the conceptual and practical history of Swedish social work, writes that “Satka presents her solution to the dualism of theory



and practice in social work. In my opinion her goal is overly ambitious." He continues his argumentation by questioning what I actually mean when I say that my intention is to avoid on the theoretical and methodological levels has become the traditional division between theory and practice, and also what I mean when I refer to the "ontological move" (Satka 1995, 4) produced by my method in researching social work.

Haluk Soydan (e.g. 1993a; 1993b) understands and interprets the relationship between the theory and practice of social work differently than I do. In his comprehensive study of the history of social work, he writes that: "I conceive social work as professional practice and as a scientific discipline. This is not a problem-free point of departure but may be the only one possible." (Soydan 1993b, 204). In his study of the history of ideas, this leads him to clearly separate the history of ideas from the history of practices. According to him, social work research should uncover the ties of social work as a discipline to the classics of the social sciences, and thus create an identity of its own among them (Soydan 1993b, 213). This raises many questions: What is the importance of getting rid of the practical past of the field? Why should we not include, for example, charity ladies or leading administrators of poor relief among the developers of social work ideas? Who benefits from this distancing? What are the possible consequences of this kind of an approach and method from the point of view of today's social workers?

In her recent research on the ongoing break in Finnish social work expertise, Ulla Mutka (1998) uncovers how the way of reasoning in the modern social sciences has had some harmful consequences on the recent development of social work. By interviewing experts of social work, she draws a conclusion about "a culture of silence" in Finnish social work in the 1990s. With this concept she refers to a condition in which there is a clear hierarchy and division between knowledge from theory and knowledge from practice to the extent that experiences in practice have been considered meaningless in constructing theoretical thought, and secondary even in the construction of the knowledge basis of the profession. The silent social workers, who neither dare to write much about their work nor participate in theoretical debates, are, according to her, a side effect of the contradictory academization of social work education in the early 1980s (e.g. Satka & Karvinen 1999). Both during and

immediately following the academic reform, applying the duality of theory and practice became a useful professional strategy of demarcation by male academics in social policy, in order to sustain a 'necessary' male order and distance in social work and social workers, enabling them to maintain their own male status and power within the academic community. I do not claim that one could generalise that the division of theory vs. practice produces similar effects world wide, however, it is important to investigate whether this dualism, which asserts the independence of the different levels of reality from each other, is conducive to the contemporary and future developments in social work.

In an article concerning the possible futures of social work, Risto Eräsaari (1995, 82) describes some characteristics of the emerging society and social life as follows:

“We all have noticed how everything that perhaps used to be constant and stable has in the contemporary situation become variable and mobile. We have also noticed the growing, almost compulsive need for a reflexive attitude to factors that earlier many have perceived as only natural... Things have become more concrete and perhaps less ideological. We have become more prepared to accept the idea of an individual as a kind of stranger – a neighbourly alien or an alien neighbour, physically close but socially distant, a ‘neighbour outside social reach’. We cannot escape the fact that something decisive, something that to my mind is decisive also for the constitution and reproduction of social work and social services, has occurred in the fields of life styles and life forms. Perhaps the process has not reached its culmination point yet.”

This quotation reveals how some of the central elements of everyday life in the family, in the household of a neighbour or in the welfare state as a whole, until recently considered stable and fixed by the modern paradigm of social work, have become variable and mobile, and also unpredictable. Startling, previously unexpected life styles and life forms among the clientele have become part of the everyday realities of the urban, middle-class social worker. Almost nothing, including the professional's everyday life, is as predictable as it used to be. This transformation of everyday life has had several consequences for social

work as a field of study, and especially for the way its theory-practice relationship has been and should be perceived.

When practice increasingly takes place under mobile circumstances and conditions of life, it is unlikely that there exist policies or theories which can cover all cases. In actual practice, the practitioner is continuously faced with situations which can only be handled by constructing both the objective of action and its necessary knowledge base in the working process case by case. There are neither ready-made packages of theories nor ethical truth-telling principles; rather, it is the practitioner who negotiates case by case how to manage in complex situations. From this it follows that it is the social worker him/herself who flexibly constructs the practice, as opposed to applying a professional model of handling people's life situations. This puts a great deal of emphasis on the practitioner's personal ability to both practice ethical reflection and to make relevant choices between theoretical concepts and methods of handling situations. (e.g. Mutka 1998).

Simultaneously, there has been an increasing amount of research which addresses the ongoing changes in knowledge production. For example, Gibbons et al. (1994, 36-38) describe in their study the new emerging forms of communication between science and society. Experts of practice are accompanied by experts from various professional practices or from third sector activities, and their different fields of knowledge can either fill the inadequacies of academic knowledge or provide necessary critique for its development. The very complex post-industrial world cannot work without mutual evaluation and discussion between different modes of knowing and between different types of knowledge. However, it is evident that one cannot assume that the problems with older models can be overcome in the forging of new links between theory and practice. The change in the context and conditions of the application of social scientific knowledge during the past decades has plunged social science into communication and discourse, or more generally, issues of mediation between theory and practice (Delanty 1997, 143).

## The theoretical framework and methodology

### *Towards relational and realist methodology*

In light of recent research, the acting subjects have become important producers and reproducers of knowledge, which might have been the case even before social theory recognised *the transformative power of agency*. In my view, a point of departure in which social work research denies practices and practically embodied generators as a source of both the history of ideas and the identity of the discipline of social work, represents one form of modernist social theory in which conceptual dualities, such as theory vs. practice, are essential. One consequence of limiting our conception of history to this kind of approach is that our thinking both about social work and in social work would be trapped within these modernist dualities, causing the reproduction of divisions such as, for example, the one between the analyses of micro-level daily practices and the theorising of ideas. I doubt the validity of such an approach under everyday circumstances in which the societal context of social work practice has recently changed quite dramatically, and continues to change, and in which the most recent social scientific debate has questioned to what extent social reality is constructed by social science (e.g. Delanty 1997; Sayer 1997; Stones 1996). Rather, we should work for methods which extend the reflexive turn in modern consciousness (Delanty 1997, 142) to the practice of social work research in order for us all to respond to the ever-changing social life.

The development of writing histories in social welfare seems to prove that every epoch needs a new interpretation or new interpretations of history, which begin from its own premises and thus help to reconstruct a valid professional identity, in order to restore the existing ideology and metanarrative for contemporary actors (see Satka 1988). During the peak of modern professionalism in social work it was common to write evolutionary histories to glorify the gains of professionalism and to raise the status of the profession. Thus, it is not surprising that the scientification of social work, the last great phase in its modernisation, also requires a story told from a past perspective, which supports its identity and status. However, my interpretation of the modernisation of Finnish social work does not belong to this genre. The essential question and starting point in my research is: How are we

to understand the past in the present in order to be able to orient ourselves toward the future? Hence, my approach emphasises a critically reflexive reinterpretation of both the modern period and modernisation as a process of development, as opposed to their consolidation.

As I wrote above, I see the future of social work as differing in many important ways from its past as it is situated in modernity. In terms of examining the history of learning, in my view the most central change is that scientific knowledge is no longer independent, but is rather in constant interaction with other academic genres through actors' everyday practice. This provokes an interesting question: how, and through what processes do the actors' understanding of matters change, and what kinds of factors are influential or what kind of interaction happens between them during this change? Thus, in my historiography of ideas, I am not interested in dealing with concepts or theories only on the level of texts and ideas. Rather, I am interested in them both as practical tools in outlining everyday work and in bringing order to the chaos of everyday life, and in this sense I commit myself to the idea of social constructivism. I view action as a social construction, which could be inherently existentialist in nature. I agree with Stones (1996, 32) who writes "...there is no contradiction between accepting that events, actions and institutions are social constructions, and accepting that they have an existential reality of their own; they are constructed in particular ways at particular times and places, and the goal of the realist sociologist is to get as close as possible to being able to recreate those particular ways, to come as close as possible to being able to 'tell it like it was'."

The concepts and theories immortalised in texts on social work act as instruments of professional and administrative power, although in my view power is not only the result of a process in which meanings are constructed. My aim is to come to see the world differently; I am studying concepts and theories in connection with the most important structures and relations in ordinary practice, as organisers of actual practices and co-ordinates of exercising power in people's daily lives (cf. Smith 1999, 97-99). It follows that I treat texts as a feature of, for example, professional and administrative organisations, which thus consequently transforms the simple understanding of theory common in the traditional historiography of ideas.

My point of departure is helpful in the examination of the relationship between theory and practice from the perspective of the actor, thus simultaneously averting the ontological discussion of the relationship between theory and practice. I have called this an “ontological move”, since my approach helps to overcome the dualism of theory and practice on the level of theory and method in writing an history of social work. I consider this move necessary in attaining the aims of the future described above. This does not mean that it is my intention to try to solve the unsolved philosophical dilemma of ontology (theory vs. practice) in western scientific thought (cf. Soydan 1996, 145). It has not been my intention to take the discussion on the level of philosophy as such; I am not a philosopher, but a social scientist, a reproducer and transformer of the knowledge under study, and thus personally deeply concerned about the future of social intervention and social work.

In other words, my conception of social reality is very much relational. I consider historical actors’ social being as constituted by and in social relations, presupposed by their social acts. The actor, a social worker or a social scientist, acts in a site in which several structural determinations intersect. His or her activities are embedded and organised in extended social relations<sup>3</sup>, social structures like gender, and thus cannot be explained by mere discursive processes as common in social constructivism. My interpretation seeks to transcend the opposition between social theory and agency, and to explain how they might have been combined in the process of modernisation. My aim is to reconstruct a world that was actual and functioning, and in which there existed interactions between subjects, meanings and material realities. It is a social reality that is constructed communicatively but also simultaneously causally.

In my bridging work I found Dorothy E. Smith’s (e.g. 1988; 1990a; 1990b) sociological theorising extremely interesting and useful. Its theoretical and methodological frame solidly supported my efforts as a social worker and social scientist to understand not only the written doctrine, but also its practical consequences, as well as the social context and dynamics in which the discourses of social work had been put together in history. Her method emphasises the importance of exploring the actual practices of actual individuals as socially co-ordinated and co-ordered practices. This co-ordination is mediated by various types of texts and documents. Smith expands the terrain of the origi-



nal method to cover both the social relations of knowledge and the forms of consciousness in social institutions. (see Smith 1988, 133-135; Smith 1990a, 68, 92, 97). Thus, it is a theory which aims to understand social processes in terms of an active subject. In addition, it deals with the transmission of objectifying structures of knowledge into grassroots practices through discourses, doctrines, laws and documents. According to her theory, the outcome are social relationships organised by texts (therapeutic, market, and network relations), practices, and a specific professional consciousness. I found her theoretical and methodological ways of visualising this essential dimension of modern social control especially useful: power mediated through texts and theories, producing relations of ruling which organise modern institutions, standardising their function as well as actors' awareness and self-understanding. In the following section I will attempt to explain why, after tedious exploration, the aforementioned approach to the texts and documents of public institutions as active organisers of people's everyday lives has been a source of constant fascination to me as both a researcher and an insider in the field of social work (see also Satka 1994b).

### *Texts as data*

Perhaps one poorly understood, yet extremely important mediator in the process of modernisation is the analysis of the text as an active contributor to the relations of ruling. The operation of the structuring effects of texts has been compared to a prism that bends and breaks up the light that passes through it. In the same way texts can be grasped in time, and their reading at a certain moment in a course of action organises what happens next. Texts make magic things possible; that is, a text "put into practice" makes meanings and relations appear that could never occur in events in which texts play no major role (Smith 1991, 160).

Empirically speaking, the aim of my research has been to discover the formation of the conceptual (and practical) history of Finnish social intervention over the period of time during which it was transformed from a local and communal tradition of delivering relief into a textually maintained professional practice, that is, when it was transformed from local knowledge into modern, textually co-ordinated in-

ternational forms of functioning. I undertook to apply the above-described approach to original sources connected with doctrinal issues, social history, and the history of ideas from the 1850s onwards. It was at this time that a powerful unification and institutionalisation of social work began through legal documents and other administrative texts, followed by a slowly increasing number of textbooks and occupational articles for practitioners in the social field. This range of texts from the social sector serve as my research material. The choice of the particular texts that have been selected for detailed investigation from the extensive resource pool of all the textual documents of the Finnish social intervention since the late nineteenth century was based on the following considerations.

First, the analysed texts are a matter of personal choice. That is, as a member and insider of the changing discourses and debates in social work since the early 1970s, I have gained an insider's competence in reading them. In selecting the texts for investigation, I have consciously utilised that experience by reading through all the material published on various national forums from 1850 to 1960, material aimed to inform, educate or advise those dealing with activities such as poor relief and those that followed. I have chosen to more closely analyse texts, or a group of linked texts, which either clearly incorporate an entirely new conceptual practice, or begin to use the existing conceptual apparatus differently. Secondly, the final choice of the analysed texts has been influenced by the concept of conceptual practice, and the method of investigating texts as active constituents of restructuring institutions and people's daily lives.

### *The theoretical concepts*

I have learned and reconstructed both the concept of *conceptual practice* and my method of investigating texts from the exciting scholarly work of Dorothy E. Smith. The conceptual practices belong to the elementary processes of modern ruling (e.g. Smith 1990b, 83-104; Smith 1990a, 212-224); they take place in these processes; and they are just one form in which ruling 'works' in the societal activities of people. I use the term *conceptual practice* as a concept for the processes in which the administrative, managerial and professional texts of social intervention are read, and sometimes also written and interpreted by actors (profes-

sionals, volunteers, common people, etc.) in a given time and place. It follows that the concept can be seen as manifesting itself in a multitude of ways. For example, I have analysed the conceptual practices as being integral to institutional ideology, individual consciousness and the professional mode of intervention.

From the anchorage of the analysis in the embodied actor or actors, that is, in the authors of the analysed texts in their historical social relations, it follows that the research material must include detailed data both about the individuals concerned and the social relations of their time. The data regarding individuals comes from various sources, including not only published memoirs and unpublished statements and reports, but also more than 20 interviews with the analysed authors, their spouses, friends or contemporary colleagues. I have noticed that the interview data, or detailed personal memories, considerably improve the chances to understand and interpret the author's texts in both the local and extended social relations of the period in question. The data turns out to be a necessary precondition for an interesting investigation (cf. Smith 1990b, 11-28). The social relations of the time I have reconstructed are mainly taken from studies of Finnish history, but also include several heterogeneous sources, such as state committee reports, documents of civil organisations, social work curricula, newspapers and the analysed texts and textbooks themselves.

I have analysed the changes in conceptual practices from the viewpoints of both the developers of the doctrine as well as the *relations of ruling*, in which doctrinal and practical changes occurred until the end of the 1950s, at which point the final signs of modernisation emerged in the social field. Namely, the bureaucratic agency referred to as 'social welfare', and two competing groups of professionals: municipal welfare workers and clinical social workers. The modern ruling apparatus consists of institutions of administration, management, and professions; and of intellectual and cultural discourses which organise, regulate, and lead our society. In them the organisational processes that control, regulate and order become loosely co-ordinated as a complex of ruling relations and apparatuses. They are characterised by a capacity to realise the same forms, relations, and courses of action in the local settings in which they operate and which they regulate. The governing of modern societies is carried out in the abstract, i.e. in textual concepts and symbols. We are governed through them, and at

the same time we participate through them both as citizens and professionals in the daily practices of ruling. (e.g. Smith 1990a, 23, 212-214). I understand the relations of ruling as forms of specialised and distinct organisation and relations mediated by texts.

Thus, I am particularly concerned with the active ways in which particular texts began to organise the relations between people, and also how this organisation was shaped in a given time and from debate to debate in the context of the developing relations of ruling. I have engaged in a reconstruction of the way in which the authors of a given time wrote and read the texts in the social contexts of their daily lives, and I have questioned the effects of this reconstruction in the context of the modern relations of ruling, which originated in their everyday practices and from the institution that began as poor relief. My assumption is that disciplinary and administrative texts are crucially important mediums of institutional action, communication, and shared consciousness.

Locating the authors in the local social relations of their daily practices and in the extended relations of their time, enables us to reconstruct the selection, evaluation, and articulation processes which were involved in the production of their texts. Actually, this provides an opportunity to paint a vivid picture of knowledge in practice, enabling us to comprehend something about the development of social work knowledge in the social relations of actual actors, local and national governments, state formation, professional powers and institutional ideologies.

The interpretative practices of the researcher are also a relational process. To capture the relational nature of texts in practice, Dorothy E. Smith has developed the term and methodology of *social relations*. Consequently, she speaks about social relations differently than sociologists are accustomed to (e.g. as abstracted norms of normative structures held to link positions or roles). In her work, social relations refer to an organisation of actual sequences of action in time. The concept identifies how individuals' actual practices are articulated and coordinated in the social courses of action. Thus, social relations enable the researcher to locate particular analytic sites, particular evidence of a social process, as constituents of sequences of action in which many individuals play a part. (See e.g. Smith 1990a, 92-97, 221-222; Smith 1990b, 148-151.) This is also the mode in which the often vague concept of social relations appears in my study (Satka 1995). This meth-

odological approach rejects investigating the selected texts as sources of mere linguistic meanings. Instead, it approaches these texts as active contributors to the institutional processes of development. In the next section, I will attempt to illustrate step by step how such an analysis might proceed in actual research practice.

First, no historical research can escape the criticism of its sources. This means that on the one hand, a researcher must be clear about the original task of the text he or she is analysing, as well as how it is proportioned in its era as a whole. On the other hand, the significance of the contents of the text must be questioned; one must question what part of a whole the particular text is, as well as what role or function it has played in the collection of material as a whole. In the practice of doing research, the criticism of sources in analysing the texts of a given writer simply means that the ongoing interaction between contemporary concepts and the theoretical-analytical concepts used by the researcher is an unavoidable part of the researcher's analysis.<sup>4</sup> Historians have consistently criticised social scientists for attempting to confuse contemporary ideas with the past, and for drawing conclusions which are impossible when taking the conditions of the time-period into consideration (e.g. Sulkunen 1991). Especially in the beginning of my analysis, when I had just become acquainted with the material, I kept the relationship to theoretical concepts open. In other words, I decided which concepts I would use only once I was able to deem my own concept workable period<sup>5</sup> by period, without having to use much force against the texts I was researching and their patterns of thought in the context of their own time. Of course, this principle has many consequences for the concepts used by the researcher, which is one reason why, for example, the concept of *conceptual practices* acquired quite a multifarious interpretation in my research.

## Analysing conceptual practices in social relations

### *The contextualised text as a starting point*

The theoretical-methodological frame of reference that I have chosen led me to examine texts, concepts and theories as part of professional and bureaucratic practice, in that I based my analysis on individual

authors who have later been estimated to have held a significant position in the development of studies of social work through their influence on both the levels of ideas and practice. This type of approach made it possible to link the texts under analysis as part of the relations of ruling and the societal relations of the time in question to a place and time. Additionally, this linkage was helpful in moving past the ideology contained in the analysis of the social work texts. The theoretical-methodological perspective and research task of the researcher also plays a significant role in the textual analysis. For example, it helps the researcher to compare the phenomenon he or she comes across in the text with each other, and it helps pose questions to the documents even about matters from which they explicitly shy away. Additionally, a researcher in the field benefits from theory driven thought, because it helps free him or her from the kind of discursive reading of analytical texts to which he or she is bound by their education.

My aim was not to reconstruct the authors' conception of time, but was rather the interpretation of their texts as part of the use of power and societal macro relations of the time. My aim was to interpret these authors' texts within the context of their time and place of action. I was interested in how their texts are interpretable as a part of the invisible relations of ruling and practice of their time, which are not directly recognisable in anyone's experiences as such. They are unattainable to the people of the time. My aim was to interpret social welfare and social work textbooks, both as social products and a source of penetrating relations of ruling. I aimed at being empathetic toward the people I researched as well as toward their intentions, in that my aim was not to challenge their own understanding. (See e.g. Fentress & Wickham 1992).

In the following section I will describe in detail the phases of analysis included in the process of analysing the texts. My analysis of the texts of the pioneers of social work progressed on the one hand as a sort of analysis of a body of knowledge history, in other words, as an analysis confined to a certain period, and on the other hand as an analysis between the periods of knowledge history under examination. I chose the texts of a writer who, in my opinion, represented one of the most important writers in the history of social work knowledge to represent each period.

## *The process of following interpretations*

First, I examine the analysis of the interpretation of one of the pioneer's texts in the context of the entirety of the period he or she lived in. In practice, the analysis of one writer's texts simultaneously progressed on three different levels: (1) the level of the history of knowledge; (2) the institutional level and (3) the level of macro-sociological reflection and interpretation. I will describe these levels of analysis below. Until the construction of a complete interpretation between the periods in a text, every interpretation was a discussion and reflective process between the available empirical and theoretical points of departure and the possible resulting concepts. A researcher aiming at analysing historical processes and occurrences as truthfully as possible must not possess ready-made concepts before the collection of material. The 'ripening' of the theoretical frame of reference and the development of concepts in my research slowly developed over the course of my interpretations to their final form only after I had deemed them workable in relation to the empirical aspects of my texts. However, it was my theoretical points of departure that directed what I was searching for in the texts, and I often discovered that I found what I was looking for elsewhere than I had originally expected. In the course of my analysis the concept of conceptual practice became enriched and gained a variety of meanings. For example, the detailed memoirs of G.A. Helsingius, Finland's first inspector of poor relief, made it possible for me to depict the changes in his thought as he went from being a national activist to being one of the country's leading public servants, as one example of the development of conceptual practice. My interpretations were often surprising, in that I aimed at producing new knowledge by constantly making use of the tension between my theoretical point of departure and historical empiricism in the construction of interpretations.

Before beginning the textual analysis, I had uncovered for myself earlier historical research and uniting periodical documents used as sources in the ideological atmosphere of the period in question, societal relationships, and the possible current changes in them, as well as the breaks in the daily lives of people, to which social work actors in addition to others had to react (e.g. Satka 1994a). Additionally, I carefully acquainted myself both with all of the pioneers about whom I wrote, and with the available material on his or her personal history. The mem-

oirs written by the pioneers themselves proved to be especially rewarding. However, in using them one must remember that the memories and interpretations of occurrences become reconstructed over time (e.g. Martin 1995). In acquainting myself with individuals' personal histories I also conducted interviews with those writers who were still living, and who were willing to act as my informants. The same warnings apply to information gathered through interviews as to written memoirs.

In my analysis, I have begun from the assumption that subject Z, for example, has written his or her text in certain cases generally either for a wider or smaller group of readers based on his or her professional position or social network. I have posed the question: by whom is this text intended to be read, or on whom is it intended to be carried out? In choosing the texts I have used, I have already emphasised writers and texts that bring something new to the earlier conceptual practice and discourse in social work. Next I began to distinguish the conceptual innovations in Z's texts. In order to obtain new knowledge from the central concepts and their relationships to one another, I began to proportion them in relation to the context of the time period, in questioning the need for such conceptual innovations. What else were they intended to organise? Simultaneously, I attempted to uncover what kinds of re-organisational effects applying these concepts and the entire discourse would appear to have on welfare practice of the time in question; in other words, what began to change when examined over a long period of time? Finally, I joined the results of my analysis and the re-organisational effects of conceptual practices to what I felt were some of the most central relations of ruling of the time period in question, and I speculate on whether this new 'order' has re-modifying or strengthening effects on macro-social relations of ruling.

The second dimension of progressively interpreting the texts in the context of the entirety of the time period was their analysis as a part of their own institutional entirety, such as a part of relief work, poor relief, social welfare and social work. Based on the theory in my point of departure, I have assumed that within these institutions, the texts have both educational and administrative functions. For example, for their own part, the texts produce and preserve both a certain course of action and institutional ideology, as well as, for example, order between genders and generations that is typical to institutions, which, of course, is not independent of the corresponding surrounding orders. Addi-



tionally, the discourses provided by the texts direct those working within the institutions to interpret the diversity in everyday life in the language of the institution and from its perspective. The texts equip the actors with a certain kind of eyeglasses. In other words, the texts repeat the ideological schemata of the institution (see Figure 1.). I have indeed asked of the texts I have analysed: what kind of order were the new concepts intended to bring to the thought of professional or volunteer social workers? And what kinds of tools did the text, its concepts, rules of interpretation etc. provide particularly for the interpretation of new everyday phenomenon, for example, social problems, so that practical actors could discursively deal with them 'correctly' in relation to historically built institutional ideology and the dominant social order of the institution, which both reproduced quite slowly?

Figure 1. *The analysis of texts in their institutional context*

I The invisible ideological schemata of the institution

- \* gender order
- \* making social citizenship

*texts make  
institutional order*

II The discursive level

- \* concepts
- \* method(s) of interpretation
- \* institutional consciousness

*texts provide  
the interpretative scheme  
for "the particulars"*

III The level of everyday practices  
or "the particulars"

The final stage in the interpretation of the entire period was the macro-sociological interpretation, by which I mean the analysis of how Z's texts were a part of the relations of ruling of the period. I carefully contextualised Z primarily to a time, place, social class and gender. Simultaneously, I acquainted myself and empathised with his or her personal history and persona. By combining knowledge and empathy, I aimed at comprehending as completely as possible who he or she was as a writer, and what kinds of goals he or she might have had as an individual working within certain social relations. I aimed at conducting a conversation with his or her texts. The more I was able to utilise both individual Z's thinking and documentation, which illuminated his or her social networks, the more interesting the analysis was. The other aspect of this analysis was the pioneer writer's active perception as a part of the macro-structures of his or her time, its proportional system of social classes, gender and generation relationships, as well as Finnish administrative relationships (the state-municipality dimension). In contemplating the mediation between these two levels, the writer's texts were the decisive element, from which I searched for both the macro-structures of the period and a connection to or tension between the writer's own social relationships. I aimed at interpreting the writer's texts as a part of the social relationships of his or her societal place of action. The following example of the analysis of one social work pioneer's texts in the context of his social connection tells what kinds of new concepts the analysis of his texts produced with regard to those in need of help, social workers and the relationships between them.

### A case example:

#### A civil activist's contribution to poor relief

Konrad Fredrik Kivekäs was born a member of the estate of clergy in 1847. As a young student in the 1870s he became an enthusiastic supporter of the nationalist Fennomanian ideology, the Finnish language and Finnish culture, and was also an enthusiastic activist of the temperance movement since its inception. Kivekäs was a journalist, and his small publishing company published a nation-

alistically oriented newspaper, Kaiku. The newspaper has been described as having been locally advisory and inspirational with regard to both nationalist thought and matters of culture and economy. One feature common to Kivekäs' texts, both as an editor-in-chief and as a Fennoman in general, is an active criticism of the non-nationalist state bureaucrats. Being the head of the company and knowledgeable in foreign languages, he had access to the contemporary European discourses of social intervention. For example, the company published enlightening European temperance literature in Finnish.

In 1894, Kivekäs, as a layman, was elected head of the municipal board of poor relief in his hometown of Oulu, in northern Finland. He immediately started to enthusiastically improve local poor relief. In the same year, Kivekäs visited Elberfeld, a small town in Germany known for its innovative system of poor relief. As a result, in 1910 he published an extensive handbook, "Elberfeldin järjestelmä, sen synty ja kehitys" (The system of Elberfeld, its birth and development). The book described the German novelty in detail. The book was published for the enlightenment and advice of charity associations and municipal boards of poor relief for the development of their practices. The author did not think that the German model and organisation should be applied to Finnish conditions as such, nor did he think that the "need" for such an organisation was the same as in the society of its origin. (cf. Kivekäs 1910, Foreword).

My sources of Kivekäs' life events mention the activities in which Mrs. Kivekäs constantly assisted her husband – mainly through editorial and clerical work. This brief detail is an illustrative reminder of the daily relations of men and women in the family, and also of the contemporary gender relations in general, under which Kivekäs developed the influential reform of Finnish poor relief. (Kansallinen elämäkerrasto 1930, 168-169; Kuka kukin oli 1961, 248).

### *The new facts of shepherding*

An administrative body of laymen, Kivekäs among them, presented an applied proposal for the supplementary municipal regulations of poor relief in Oulu in 1894. The proposal followed the model and the detailed regulations developed in Elberfeld. It was the very first Finnish docu-

ment that defined the post and duty of a voluntary poor relief worker who was not a member of the board, but was rather an especially honoured (Ehrenamt) assistant, called a “shepherd of the poor” (köyhäinkaitaja; Armenpfleger). The requirements and duties of the volunteer were as follows:

9 §

The shepherd must be the mainstay of all those who need help in the municipality. May he be the eye of poor relief who can separate between truth and lie even in the darkest of houses. May he be the ear who not only listens to the poor, but also explores the birth of misery and its deepest reasons. May he also be the tongue who speaks for the truly poor, but not for the others. And finally, may he be the hand who gives for those who are in need from the funds that are collected for helping the poor. In order to fulfil his duties, the shepherd must frequently visit the houses of the needy...

Moreover, the local model regulations noted that shepherds for the poor should be elected among men and women who are known as decent people, and who are themselves willing to begin the honoured voluntary work among the poor of the district of their residence. In this case, the volunteer was considered qualified for the duty if he or she possessed “an enlightened and burning love for one’s neighbours”, in addition to “an unwavering sense of justice” (Kaiku 19.9.1894). It was emphasised that a personal friendship between the poor and the visitor was crucial to shepherding. All signs of officialdom were to be kept far away from this particular relation, which the authors often describe with highly emotional attributes such as “love” and “care” (e.g. Kaiku 16.7.1894; Sarlin 1915, 85-86).

As a practical affair, visiting the poor meant that a representative of the wealthier members of society became acquainted with the poor of the neighbourhood. Their duties included investigating the need for relief, giving advice on a range of everyday issues, and following the daily course of the life of a poor person or family. In short, it was the constant shepherding of the poor neighbour’s way of life from one occasion to the next. The other function of this constant visiting was invisible to the poor. Namely, the constant reporting to the district member of the municipal board of the status and state of needs of

those receiving relief.

The workhouses (an idea borrowed from continental Europe and Sweden) were responsible for the disabled and undisciplined poor who were classified as non-citizens (Satka 1995, 24-27), meaning that the work of the volunteer shepherd was primarily targeted at children and adults who received relief within the home. In other words, the shepherd's target group was the poor "citizen in potentia". Kivekäs describes this group as helpless, and as such as comparable to innocent children in need of well-meaning shepherding by someone more knowledgeable:

"...the poor, helpless to support themselves, are like children, who need nursing and guidance at each step. And they lack not only nourishment and protection for their bodies but also skilful treatment, advice, upbraiding, warning – in a word, all kinds of support..." (Kaiku 4.4.1894).

The above redefinition of the object of poor relief work is clever. It introduces the reader, who is likely to be one of the more well-to-do people, to the existence of quite an important discursive fact, namely, the *innocent poor*. The term does not put the main emphasis on the poor's moral status as such, but rather on their lack of education. The underlying common belief of educated people was that education was the means to improve the moral status of the poor and lower classes in general. According to this belief, popular education was what these groups needed in order to lift themselves out of poverty and social ills. Therefore, the concept of the innocent poor does not leave the reader apathetic, since he or she is already aware of their moral responsibility to enlighten the less educated. Thus, the existence and the idea of the innocent poor acted as a strong invitation to every respectful citizen of the upper classes to partake in the guidance and education of a poor individual or, in all likelihood, a poor family.

If and when the innocent poor were used as the nomination to coordinate the activities of the representatives of the educated classes in their assistance practices with the poor, there was inherent self-evident authority and supervision of the helper of the poor. The poor as members of the uneducated mass were viewed as a group of moral suspects. Therefore, according to the shepherding discourse, they required

particular attention and guidance by the educated. Since the poor's citizenship status was under question, and because they were considered ignorant, they also required constant case-by-case instruction. Only then could one expect that they learn the norms of decent citizenship, such as economy, sobriety, industriousness, truthfulness, qualified wifehood, domestic economy, mothering and child rearing (e.g. Sarlin 1915).

## Kivekäs' texts and the social relations of the time

At this point I will change the scope of analysis, since my analytic strategy is based on the assumption that the activities of actual individuals are always embedded in the organisation of extended social relations, like gender and class. My analytic gaze will move from the social relations in the text to the social relations in which the author wrote his texts, and in which they formed an operative part. (cf. Smith 1988, 127-143.) Thus, I am going to explore the social relations that structured Kivekäs' texts about shepherding the poor in order to find out how it was possible that his texts – the texts of a volunteer and opponent of the administrative elite – eventually became so influential, and even advocated by those in the state administration.

### *The texts in class relations*

In many of his texts, Kivekäs underlines that poor people should be grateful to the educated classes, who in turn are responsible for showing kindness to them. The foreword of his handbook (Kivekäs 1910) reveals his wish for and the goal of his textual activities:

“...will make miracles; the kind of poor relief that forces the poor and the wealthy to meet each other face to face, will be educational to all participants, and will be no less beneficial to the upper class than it will be to the lower class.”

The statement regarding the interaction of different classes in order to educate both participants illustrates how immediately his textual practices articulated the class politics of the period. Actually, he introduced Elberfeld's poor relief system as an answer to the problems

in class relations. Additionally, Kivekäs' particular enterprise was connected with the larger social project of the Fennomans' nationalist power campaign against the Swedish-speaking upper class (see also Satka 1990). Their basic doctrines belong to an alliance of the educated classes and the common people, in which the former hold leadership. (cf. Alapuro 1994, 309). In this light, even those citizens who were unable to support themselves, and whom many considered only a despised underclass with questionable status as citizens, were suitable political allies – they were “sisters and brothers whom one had to support and help tolerantly, skilfully and with love” (Kaiku 13.7.1894). In addition to providing other improvements for the working class, the relief reform including the shepherds fit their group interests quite well. It was one step closer to the realisation of the Fennomanian dream of acquiring more power and becoming part of the group who control governing (cf. Alapuro & Stenius 1987, 12-19; Sulkunen 1986, 35-39).

The shepherd system as a reform of poor relief in 1909 became the object of a nation-wide discussion fifteen years after Kivekäs had introduced it. Following this, interest in its benefits increased to the point that the discussion and experimenting resulted in an important turn for its support in 1913. At the beginning of the year, *Köyhäinboitoletti* (1913), a journal of poor relief that had begun to be published a few years earlier, published a proposal for municipal regulations of poor relief including a shepherd system. The state administrators, the makers of the proposal, thus clearly recommended the new organisation to municipalities. In addition, a few months later an extensive and noteworthy national Congress of Poor Relief took place in Helsinki, inviting every decent Finn to “save the poor and fallen”.

The Congress was initiated by the educated groups in co-operation with the representatives of municipalities and the state administration of poor relief. The organisers also included representatives of the leading women's associations and of the educational elite (e.g. the rector and professors of the only university in the country). The shepherd system was actually the form for the whole program of the Congress, because the principal purpose of the event was to improve the co-operation between the volunteers and the local officials in poor relief practices. In addition to shepherding and domestic economics counselling, the increasing activity in many industrialised communities was a target of discussions among men and women who underlined its

importance both in poor relief and in educating the Finnish people. (Suomen yleisen... 1913, 192-204).

The Congress concluded by making a common declaration which recommended shepherding of the poor to every decent Finn. Thus, the volunteering that Kivekäs had introduced as a representative of the educated people in accordance with his own class interests crystallised in citizens' "general conscription in the war against poverty", to use Kivekäs' formulation on the front page of his handbook (Kivekäs 1910).<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the Congress became a forum in which the participants were involved in drawing guidelines for a consecutive ideological scheme for national poor relief for the forthcoming reforms. (see Suomen yleisen... 1913). According to the words of the chairman of the Congress, it was meant, however, "to strengthen the Finnish nation" in its struggle for existence.

It is interesting that the shepherd system was introduced as an alliance with common people in the 1890s by educated people struggling for their own influence, and became widely supported by the ruling class in the 1910s. My conclusion about the initial delay and the great interest in shepherding that followed is this: When the antithesis between the upper classes and the poor masses was growing, the system developed a useful means to negotiate between the well-to-do and the poor in terms of class relations. In 1915, Axel Nilsson (1915, 61, cf. Kivekäs 1910, v), a poor relief inspector from the inspectorate of poor relief wrote:

"The more personal and individual poor relief work becomes, the less class hatred the proletariat is likely to show."

The bourgeois groups were enthusiastic about building networks of apparent solidarity between the various classes (cf. Alapuro 1994, 101). In the changing circumstances, an atmosphere of confidence among the people was no longer important merely because of the Russian threat to the governing classes. The common people had become another, and even more significant threat from which they wanted to protect themselves. Therefore, after 1907, the popularity of the shepherd system rapidly spread from the Fennomans to other groups who had also become concerned about their status in the changing relations of governing. Under these circumstances, the shepherd system became



one of the forums and means of negotiating Finnish class relations, and simultaneously it also became a forum for negotiating the relations between men and women.

### *The texts and gender order in poor relief*

The division of labour was originally established by the constitutional statutes of the poor relief according to the contemporary gender order, but the expansion of shepherding meant an important revision of the institutional gender order. This new organisation was implemented by the first paid male officers of poor relief in larger towns and supported by the poor relief counsellors, beginning from 1909, the same year in which the shepherd system began to gain increasing popularity. In addition, the first municipal employees of poor relief initiated an active textual advocacy for a reorganised division of labour in local poor relief work. In their articles they further developed the discourse introduced by Kivekäs. They stated that their purpose was to make the functioning of the local poor relief more reliable and objective, in addition to its being a real educational instance to the poor. (e.g. Sarlin 1915, 94). In the same texts, the authors also began to clearly distinguish between the two kinds of poor relief work and function: between immediate personal interaction and administration; and between the personal and legal function of poor relief (e.g. Sarlin 1916, 78-79, 85-86). Their opinion was that the investigation of need includes both the legal and the personal aspect, whereas administration is limited to the former.

Thus, it was the shepherd discourse that provided both the men of civil associations and civil servants conceptual tools with which to redraw the limits of the spheres that were “for men only”, and “for both women and men”, and to attach them both to the corresponding gender attributes and the gender-based hierarchical order. Consequently, the shepherds were placed in a hierarchical relation first to the district member, and then to the municipal board of poor relief. This is an example of how women’s participation in poor relief and social mothering was normalised as a secondary and clearly separate sector in a field that was already established as a sphere of male public administration. Moreover, it passes for an example of a textually reproduced, gendered division of labour in an institution that was under reconstruction. The discourse revised the gender order of poor relief and

reproduced the ideological scheme of the institution appropriate to the changing social relations.

## Concluding the process of interpretations

The analysis of each text of a particular writer can be compared to a window which opens the historical scenery behind the view that appears in the windows. The researcher's most difficult task is to create a picture or tell a story which, despite the narrowness of the views reached, aims at providing a general overview. In other words, the creation of a collage, and the drawing of conclusions, based on singular openings about what is contained in this scenery, how its different parts relate to each other, and how all of this changes over time. In addition to painting a picture, the story aims at providing answers to the 'why' questions. The researcher may attempt to assess missing information by building a chain of conclusions through putting forth questions and assumptions. The painting of a period by period picture, or the proportioning of interpretations to one another as a story, occurs by considering which story or stories the researcher sees as worth being told to the readers, and which of these stories are interpretable. The story's argumentation must be believable, and in order to be so, the analysis and the building of its chain of conclusions must fill the requirements of the critique of references of historical research. The writing of a research report is like the piecing together of a jigsaw puzzle: instead of putting pieces together, in an interpretation we simultaneously put together both the argumentation of historical construction and the researcher's concepts of social theory. The following is a condensed version of the picture painted by my own research.

The title of my treatise, *Making social citizenship*, summarises what in the history of Finnish social work has proven to be relevant across its different phases. Social work has been used to assess and regulate the social and moral dimension of the citizenship of those Finns who were poor, regarded as deviant, or incapable of adjusting to the changing ideals of citizenship. The goal of the various activities of the well-to-do who have been e.g. civil activists, educators, lawyers, civil servants, has been the entire nation's well-being and the state's

success. This conclusion can also be made on the basis of the picture research has drawn of the state-centrality of the Finnish relations of ruling. A key factor in the development of Finnish social intervention has been the development of the Finnish state apparatus and officials. A second critical factor has been the discursive, i.e. textually mediated changes in state administration. However, this is far from a complete explanation. Furthermore, the relations of ruling have their own inner logic, which embraces both the gender order and class relations.

As early as the 19th century it became clear that the welfare officials could not organise poor relief without women's skills and labour. Consequently, in 1888 unmarried women and widows were given the right to be elected members of local Poor Relief Boards. When the national poor relief institution was being constructed, the number of guards for the poor rose, and shepherding poor differentiated itself from administration. In this process the same gender order was constructed in the social service field that we continue to reproduce in our everyday lives. In accordance with the logic of the relations of ruling, the task of women was to work in the field, while men were charged with decision-making and tasks connected with the public sphere. Thus, writing texts dealing with ruling was also defined as a masculine task, and was subjected to attributes that were considered typical of men's activities, such as "rationality". This word was used to signal that men's action differed from that of women, who were seen as working with emotional involvement. Women's work was also lower in the occupational hierarchy than men's work. The women's task was to apply concepts and forms to practices that were described by feminine attributes.

When the history of the doctrine and practices of social work are connected within the development of the concrete and historical relations of ruling of the country, for instance, those social relations in which the poor, the deviant, and social workers have encountered each other in different periods, reveals interesting details on the connections between the dynamics of Finnish relations of ruling and the development of the social field. During the first half of this century, for example, the relationship between the poor and their shepherds was characterised by sisterhood and brotherhood designed to maintain friendly class relations. After the Civil War in 1918, when

the class relations were filled with suspicion and bitterness, direct state control was introduced into the relationship between the poor and their shepherds. In the 1930s, the same idea of control was extended by legislative measures to cover all poor and deviant individuals. After the war years, however, the state control policy was supplemented by a very different strategy: the welfare state. It was based on the use of both legislation and expert work. The state became interested in people's everyday lives, in the nuclear family, and in individuals who adjusted to modern society and could support themselves, and it began to take responsibility for their support. This meant that the regulatory control of the family and the new individual needed a new, discursively qualified party – the social worker.

From the logic of the developing relations of ruling, it followed that the practical actors – the poor or the shepherds, the client or the social worker – were not regarded as carriers of relevant knowledge. The analysed texts did not deal with the knowledge of the actors on the grassroots level; in the prevailing discourse this knowledge was considered irrelevant. This was a result of a process which unified local practices by means of various texts. The decisive invention was the *form*, the latest and most efficient of manifestations, which can also be found in the field of automatic data processing. In being generalised, the form standardised the documentation of the poor people's need for help, as well as what was documented on the basis of home inspections. The more complex the practice of organising the texts became, the greater the substantial and discursive knowledge that was required of the social worker. The control state and corresponding legislation constructed in the 1930s were the turning point. Movement from everyday life to the exact interpretation presupposed by legal discourse could no longer be based on the mere use of forms. The establishment of strict state control of both needy and deviant individuals required a discursively competent social worker, who had to be educated in the interpretation of legal discourse outside the local community.

## The researcher as a subject of her study

In the course of the study, I noticed that in discovering the conceptual trajectory from the Finnish poor relief to social work, I was partly also working against the rules and self-evident assumptions that I have internalised and been perpetuating. Despite the fact that the research material far antedates my personal history, I have discovered how I am and have been reproducing many of their truths. This is because professional and scientific texts seem to have an endless capacity to reproduce the discursive social organisation they were originally intended to produce (cf. Smith 1990a, 167-170, 212). Consequently, the structuring effect of a discourse is maintained and reproduced as long as the texts are read, implemented and rewritten in a new generation of texts. Therefore, a professional analyst of texts doing her/his work within a certain tradition is tied to the constitutive intellectual conventions of the field (e.g. how to write the social into texts, how to apply discursive consciousness in analysing unexpected events), the roots of which go far back in history. Let me give an example from my own interpretative practice of welfare law, which proved to be by far the most difficult target of investigation. I believe it was a question of the researcher's personal history.

I was trained as a welfare worker during 1972-1976 at the University of Tampere. Some of the Welfare Acts of 1936 were still in force and the rest of the acts we were taught by and large through the repetition of a similar discourse. Welfare law was taught to us by highly qualified lawyers. Thus, although I was supposed to be knowledgeable about this legal discourse, it did not help me to assume an investigator's standpoint. Actually, several failed efforts at analysis left me feeling desperate. I believed that the problem was that I did not adequately understand the nature of law as a social discourse, and thus I decided to go through some of the recent work on law by feminist scholars, hoping that this would help me out of my dilemma. And it did. However, what I learned was not more about law in its own context, but rather, I gained an increased understanding of how extremely powerful a discourse the law actually is: how it constantly defines its own boundaries (e.g. what is legal, what is not), and how it considers its own practices and practitioners politically and morally neutral entities and agents. Legal reasoning does not take place in the real world, but is confined to the

abstract world of legal concepts, in which subjects are neither present nor needed. Therefore, the practitioners who apply law are only taught to deal with people's problems as legal abstractions on a conceptual level (e.g. Mossman 1991, 297).

Very slowly I started to become aware of what was bothering me. When I moved from reading to investigating, I found it difficult to leave behind the way in which I had been taught to read the texts – as factual documents. Smith (1990b, 76) describes this phenomenon as follows:

“...factual methods of reading ‘read through’ the account to the actuality beyond it; it is always supposed that there is more to be known than the account contains and that the account can (in principle at least) be checked against the actuality to which it refers.”

The turning point was the reading of a fascinating case analysis by Lucie E. White (1991, 40-58), regarding what actually transpired in the hearing of a welfare mother from her point of view. In reading the analysis, I suddenly realised that I had never really thought of the work process of welfare law from the client's point of view. Instead, I had been taught to relate myself to them through the virtual reality created by welfare law. I was unable to differentiate what in my reading was discursively organised, because the line between it and actuality was unclear to. In fact, opening the discourse from an external position was the main principle of the method (cf. Smith 1990b, 45-57, 202-206), but entering this particular textual world made an outsider's position simply impossible. It was a place without an exit.

To distance myself from the virtual reality of welfare law, I wrote the following imaginary story about how Mr. X came to be defined as an alcoholic in 1942. A great majority of treated alcoholics were men in the 1940s (Satka 1994a, 312), and so is the unnamed individual of the text. The fictitious story follows very closely what is written either in the textbook or in the Act of Alcoholics (Alkoholistolaki 60/17.1. 1936) concerning case level work. In writing the story, in addition to my own experiences both as a welfare worker and researcher of texts, my primary sources were a textbook (Toivola 1943) about welfare practices with alcoholics and vagrants, and White's (1991) aforementioned case analysis. Based on the textbook the process is as follows:

The welfare worker has received two police records of arrests for drunkenness by Mr. X. From this, it follows that the worker is due to invite Mr. X for a case investigation at the municipal welfare office. The invitation is executed by letter, which he types carefully. The textbook emphasizes the use of a distinctive terminology in written form throughout the process, because the written form transforms it into legally acknowledgeable evidence, which then becomes “the truth”, to which one may later refer.

Mr. X does not show up, which is usual for first timers. Since it is the legal duty to investigate the announced case, the welfare worker cannot give up, and he proceeds to type a second letter to Mr. X. This time he decides, in accordance with the stipulations, to threaten Mr. X with police action. The police could bring him in by force in case “the case” does not show up voluntarily.

After receiving the first letter, Mr. X is astonished and ashamed. He does not think that he needs any kind of treatment. In his opinion, the call is ridiculous. To him, alcoholics represent rabble with whom he does not want to be associated in any way. When the second letter arrives, Mr. X starts to feel very angry, but also intimidated and threatened (by the police!), and decides to go and tell the official the truth. Upon entering the office, Mr. X suddenly remembers a similar experience of a forced meeting with the police, and begins to feel subordinated. He becomes very nervous; his dignity is gone. This is because Mr. X realises that his words are not likely to be taken as legitimate testimony, and that he is unlikely to have his say in what is to come (cf. White 1991).

At the moment of stepping into the meeting room, Mr. X is so frightened that he hardly recognises the friendliness of the small, smiling man receiving him. When the welfare worker at first offers him a cigarette, Mr. X becomes greatly surprised. This makes him feel both extremely suspicious and fearful. He says to himself: “I must behave myself, and I must interact in the framework suggested; I must show that I am all right.” However, the situation is very complex (force, fear, friendliness, smoke, etc.). The worker lets Mr. X talk. This is difficult, since Mr. X does not know what he should and should not say, since he is aware that there are risks involved in what he says (cf. White 1991).

Next, the welfare worker takes the leadership by referring to

what Mr. X has just said. He disagrees with much of what Mr. X has told him about himself and his family – for example, the number of arrests and the amount of harm Mr. X's drinking causes to his family. Mr. X disagrees, but is soon silenced by all of the facts and well argued points of the worker. Next, the worker begins the factual part of the hearing: phases of life, history of drinking, living arrangements, quality of marital relationship, sickness in the family, arrests, criminal offences, other deviant behaviours, etc. He seizes on facts that have been bureaucratically defined as relevant for subsuming Mr. X's case under the Act of Alcoholics.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that Mr. X goes home dissatisfied and totally confused. The welfare worker continues with his case file. He prepares Mr. X's case carefully for the next meeting of the municipal board of welfare, which is going to decide whether Mr X, in light of the evidence and facts of the Act, is an alcoholic, as suspected. He carefully picks out every detail in the testimony that proves Mr. X guilty. In the framework of the legal method, the two arrests turn out invaluable as evidence, and as such, they are sufficient and indisputable. Since the welfare worker did a skilful job (no mistakes in the form of processing the case, and the evidence is solid), the unanimous decision of the meeting is that Mr.X is an obvious alcoholic, and in need of further treatment.

Writing this story about a probable client helped me to conceptualise welfare law from a different standpoint than the one I had been taught by lawyers. Writing became the means to gain the distance necessary for an analyst in order to produce a critical evaluation of the contents of a text. At the same time, it proved to me in a very concrete way how I, as a holder of expert knowledge, was ignorant about the ways in which I was (and still am) tied to the relations of ruling mediated by texts of welfare law, social work and social science.

## In the end

The goal of my research work has been twofold: to provide a new interpretation of the history of Finnish social work in a way in which



the interpretation would supply theoretical tools to be used in the orientation of the future of both social work and social workers. The establishment of our task has been quite demanding, and no research project can be any more than the slight opening of a door in the great re-orientation process that is going on right now in the field of social work (see, e.g., Mutka 1998; Satka & Karvinen 1999).

Many of those who have researched the changes in professionalism agree unanimously that one of the most important qualities of future actors is the ability to practice reflective orientation in his or her own activities. Its central prerequisites include the ability to question an action directed knowledge base, and to provide and embrace new knowledge, derived both from research and from personal experience. To me, this improvement of the reflective ability of social work actors - or the belief in the possibility of such an improvement- has been the most important reason for developing ideas, practices and structures of social work education and ideological history from a joint perspective of actors. Professionalism and professional action of the future may well take place in the context of quite complex relationships between the mediation and exchange of practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge, as well as the production of new knowledge and models of action, so that they are up to date in relation to any given action environment and action partners. In my opinion, the type of historical concept related to a social worker's own field, on which he or she bases his or her work, is not at all insignificant. An historically guided situational interpretation of the present time, for example, the culmination of professional development followed by its dispersal (e.g. Clarke 1993), provides actors with different kinds of resources than their predecessors and an understanding of their own actions as a part of the great, ever-changing contemporary process. It is precisely this aforementioned idea to which I have aimed at providing tools through my analysis.

The result of respecting the power of agency leads to an interpretation that does not follow the well-known institutional or transformative disciplinary boundaries, and from this point of view Finnish social work does not constitute a continuous and self-evident institution. Instead, my theoretical and methodological choices reveal Finnish social work as *a network of agents in changing practices and social relations that written doctrines and discourses increasingly direct* in the course of moderni-

sation. As opposed to linear evolution, its development is a series of often conflicting and unexpected processes in which the agents do not produce meanings apart from the structural determinants connected with the particular site of their daily practice. Even the agent's consciousness and social being is historically constructed both by and in the same social relations and structures. In addition, it seems that every historical moment in which the relations of ruling have been considerably transformed has brought the actors face to face with great uncertainty, to which contemporary time is no exception.

## Notes

- 1 This paper has been written as a part of a research project funded by the Academy of Finland.
- 2 My main research report in English is *Making Social Citizenship. Conceptual Practice from the Finnish Poor Law to Professional Social Work* (Satka 1995).
- 3 By "extended social relations" I mean sequences of socially coordinated action in which many individuals unknown to one another are or may be active.
- 4 I have learned a lot about the criticism of sources from historians, especially from Jouko Jaakkola and Panu Pulma, to whom I extend my warmest gratitude.
- 5 What I mean by *time-period* is a bloc of knowledge history, a period defined by material in which a new thought model or discourse appears which is applicable to the practices of social work. These time-periods generally follow political-administrative divisional time-frames, although usually lag many, even tens of years.
- 6 In the Poor Relief Act, passed in 1922, the shepherd system became legitimated as an organization of local poor relief work throughout the country.
- 7 Since the formal investigation begins, Mr. X becomes an outsider in his own case, and the case starts to have a life of its own. In the documentary world of welfare law, there is no place for Mr. X to talk about his subjective views, experiences, or his feelings about his life and drinking because the form that needs to be filled does not have space for such considerations. The personal is not part of the textual world into which Mr. X's life, that is, a suspected alcoholic, is now placed (cf. Smith 1990a, 12-51).

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*Teppo Kröger*

## LOCAL HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

*The unique and the general in the emergence of social care services in Finland*

### Introduction

As a modern society, Finland must be seen as a newcomer. Its history of industrialisation and urbanisation is short and quite recent. Major industrialisation only really began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and even then it did not transform the traditional structures of Finnish society at once. Rather, new industrial modes of production developed alongside the basically unchanged agrarian society. On the eve of World War II, over half of the population still worked in agriculture. Göran Therborn (1995, 69) has actually argued that Finland never entered the industrial period. When Finland finally emerged from the agrarian period in the 1960s, it changed directly into a service society. Although several other countries have made a similar jump over the industrial period, the late timing and the suddenness of this profound change in social structure is a distinctive national characteristic of Finland – at least when Finland is not compared with Eastern European or Asian countries.

The belated shift from an agrarian society can also be seen in the late urbanisation process in Finland. It was not until the early 1970s that the urban population exceeded the rural population. In the late 1960s and early 1970s a substantial migration from rural areas to towns

took place. A similar process seems to be going on currently in the late 1990s. However, even now it is questionable whether Finland can really be described as an urbanised society, as its towns are mainly small or medium-sized. The capital, Helsinki, with its population of half a million people, is the only Finnish city that has more than 200,000 inhabitants. Together with its surrounding municipalities, Helsinki forms the only large urban area in Finland. Most Finnish towns are quite provincial, having less than 20,000 residents and being surrounded by sparsely inhabited regions.

Nevertheless, the 1960s and 1970s did bring about a thorough transformation of Finnish society. Both industries and services were booming and almost desperately in need of new male and female workers. Women were as keen as men to take advantage of these new employment opportunities, although even before this, a significant number of women had been part of the labour market in Finland. Many women with small children had also been included in the labour market, but their contribution had been mainly within the agrarian economy, on small family farms. At this point, increasing numbers of these women began doing paid work. A new kind of society based on universal wage labour was emerging in Finland. Paid work became a reality for both men and women, and a two-income family model was developed.

These two decades also produced a new direction for social policies. Old and very limited residualist policies were fundamentally reformed to include larger parts of the population and more of their everyday material and immaterial needs. These new policies were created with a universalist ambition, with an aim of covering the entire population. Social policies were not to include only large social security benefit systems, but broad welfare services as well. The new universal health insurance system was accompanied by publicly provided health services. Family benefits were to be complemented by new kinds of universal family services, and new pension systems would also be followed by extending health and social care services for older people. As a result, the Finnish way of organising care for small children and older people experienced a profound change in the 1960s and 1970s. The decisions that were made at that time can be characterised as the foundation on which the care system is still based. Social Democrats are often given sole credit for this paradigmatic change in welfare politics. However, in Finland, the Social Democrats constructed the welfare

state through cooperation and struggle with the agrarian Centre Party. Social Democrats were active in transforming social policies to benefit the whole working population. However, the extension of social security and welfare services to cover those also outside the sphere of paid work was largely due to the permanence of the strong political power held by the agrarian Centre Party. Also, the mediating role of far left socialists, integrating the interests of poor rural people and workers with minor wages, should not be forgotten.

The basic argument of this article is that these historical policy changes should also be studied at the local level, and not only at the national level. There are two fundamental bases for this argument. First, the social transformation process of Finnish society has been fragmented. The extraordinary characteristic of industrialisation in Finland was its emphasis on forestry. This directed the construction of large numbers of industrial estates to places that were remote from major towns, but close to timber resources and watercourses. As a result, during the late 19th and early 20th century, 'an archipelago of small industrial communities' developed in Finland (Koskinen 1989, 184). Large industrial centres encompassing several industrial sectors were rare. Small towns and industrial communities formed what can be characterised as 'islands of modernity' amid a still agrarian country. In such a situation, social scientific and historical research that views the whole country as a single and uniform entity proves to be deficient. The marked variation between different parts of the country and different types of localities must be taken into account.

Second, social care services in Finland have been, and still are organised by local authorities. The Finnish local government system is ideologically based on the principle of local self-government, according to which, local authorities are to have the autonomy to create and implement their policies independently. Full autonomy of local democratic decision-making was to form the *sine qua non* of local government, and central government control and subordination was to be avoided. The practice, however, never fully met this ideology in Finland. The central state has from the very beginning sought at least some power and control over local governments. Nevertheless, local authorities have enjoyed discretionary powers which are quite unusual in other countries, excluding the other Nordic countries (see Kröger 1997a & 1997b). Despite the fact that the expansive welfare state



brought with it elements of intense central steering, local decision-making has retained a good part of its significance. In their comparative index of local government discretion in western Europe, Lane & Ersson (1999, 187) give Finland (along with Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland) the maximum number of points possible. In this kind of intergovernmental context, the possibility of local influence on social care policies must be taken seriously.

Thus, social changes have occurred in various Finnish localities in different ways and at a different pace. Also, social care services have been provided by local authorities that, at least in principle, have had considerable discretion. The consequences of this situation in conducting research are clear. In studying the history of social care services, confining the study merely to central policies is inadequate. Unlike most social security policies that are decided at the national level and implemented by national social security institutions, the local level is of significant importance with regard to social care policies, and therefore must be studied. In order to be able to understand the emergence and development of the actual social care provision, analyses of local policy-making and implementation processes may prove to be as essential as analyses of the processes at the central level. Quoting Gitte Lundager Rausgaard (1992, 176), a Danish historian, 'the reasons why local authorities have acted like they have acted should be searched for in the archives of the local authorities, not in the central government'.

Additionally, the relationship between these two levels requires careful analysis. In principle, such a study could be done from two different perspectives. The directing and controlling activities of the central state can be analysed from above, by looking at legislation, funding structures and the administrative measures that central government has addressed to local authorities. Nevertheless, although national policies influence local action considerably by providing its options and hindrances, they do not determine it. The response of local authorities to central initiatives is decisive in forming the actual service provision. This response may be analysed by using a bottom-up approach (Soikkanen 1996, 76). In addition, by looking at history from the local perspective, both local initiatives based on local interests, and the provisions based on these distinctively local preferences can be studied. I refer to this kind of study that focuses on local processes and the interaction between the local and the national as a 'local historical case study'.

Previously, the history of the local welfare provision has been a rather neglected area in social policy and social work research, although welfare services form a fundamental part of the welfare state in Finland. With only a few exceptions, the historical developments of local social services have received only limited attention. They are described mainly by the official local histories that almost every Finnish municipality has allowed to be written about its past. These histories usually include the entire spectrum of local government activities, as well as other locally significant historical events, which results in each sector receiving only minimal research input. The main exceptions to this rule are a detailed history of a residential care home in Tampere (Jaakkola, Kaarninen & Markkola 1986), a study of the development of child day care provision in Turku (Remmer 1989), and histories of the municipal social welfare sectors in Helsinki (Halila 1977), Jyväskylä (Karjalainen 1990), Rauma (Niemi 1990) and Lahti & Hollola (Forsius 1993). But even most of these studies have limited themselves to presenting a straightforward description of historical development, neglecting to focus on the historical breaking and turning points. Also, central–local interplay has overwhelmingly been ignored in these studies. Nevertheless, local case studies of the history of social care could provide good grounds for discussing critically prevalent welfare state theories, that is, to comment on or question them. In this respect, previous local studies have not fully realised their theoretical potential.

In Finland, social care and professional social work cannot be understood as totally separate concepts or entities. Finnish social work has traditionally been closely connected to local authorities. Professional social work education was started in the 1940s to meet the needs of local governments to administer an expanding social welfare sector. Even earlier than the 1940s, during the first decades of the century, the first group within the welfare sector to claim professional status and establish a trade union were the governors (in practice, the matrons, as most of them were female) of poor houses run by local governments. During the post-war period, professionally educated social workers have been the key figures of locally provided social services in Finland. On the one hand, they have been practising their own profession within the welfare bureaucracies. Although nowadays much of professional social work in Finland is also carried out by various specialised agencies and voluntary organisations, the majority of it is still done within

the social service departments of local authorities. On the other hand, it is precisely social workers who have been managing these social service departments. Thus, the creation of the social care system has been their responsibility at the local level.

This close and multi-faceted connection between the profession of social work and the whole local welfare sector implies that their histories are also highly interrelated. Thus, it is problematic to speak about the history of social work in Finland without discussing the changes in the functions and organisational structures of the local governmental welfare sector. Correspondingly, it would be inadequate to present the development of the social services without mentioning the role that social work has played in it. Here, my focus is primarily on the history of social care, not on the history of the profession of social work. Nevertheless, the presumption is that this kind of study may also serve the social work profession in its quest for its historical roots. Research on the history of social services provides a context that may prove helpful in understanding some of the features in the history of the profession.

## Local historical case study: principles and practices

Social work and the social service provision in Finland have been influenced by central, as well as by local government. As a result, the services have both general national and unique local features. I argue that by using the method of local historical case study, these two influences may be distinguished from each other. The method concentrates on local events and processes. However, these are analysed not as separate from national processes and policies but in connection with them. Next, I will approach the method by discussing its fundamental characteristics.

Generally, case study has become established as a useful research method in situations in which detailed knowledge is required from complex organisational or interactional settings. Quite often, case study has been presented as belonging to the category of qualitative research methods. It clearly differs from the quantitative tradition, which commonly uses statistical and survey data gathered from large samples. Instead, case study shares the qualitative idea of retreating from a mas-

sive number of observation objects in order to advance in gaining in-depth knowledge on the remaining few or only object(s). Nevertheless, many writers refuse to classify the case study as a qualitative research method. For example, Robert Stake (1994, 236) argues that case study is not at all a methodological choice, but merely the choice of the object to be studied. He explains that case studies examine individual cases, and are defined by interest in them, not by the methods of inquiry used. Thus, quantitative as well as qualitative methods can be used in conducting case studies. Similarly, Randy Stoecker (1991, 99) argues that the case study lies beyond the quantitative–qualitative debate, and can employ the best of both methods. Nevertheless, there is no universal consensus on this point, and Stake’s writing that is in question has even been published in a handbook of qualitative research methods.

The debate also raises the question as to whether case study can be called a research method at all. Stoecker (1991, 98) prefers to call it a frame, as ‘within this frame we may survey, interview, observe, participate, read, visit archives, dig through garbage, or even count’. Doing a case study means an intensive concentration on the single case or few cases chosen to be studied. Usually, several kinds of information from several sources are gathered on the chosen cases. This data may include practically anything that is considered to include relevant information on the cases. Robert Yin (1984, 20) sees the case study’s ability to deal with a variety of evidence as its most unique strength. All decisions concerning the selection of the cases and the selection of the empirical materials aim at maximising the possibilities of attaining relevant information with which the research questions of the study can be efficiently addressed.

In this paper, case study is provided with two epithets, historical and local. What additional characteristics do they bring with them? Local historical case studies must comply with the generally approved criteria and principles for historical research, which include a particular concern regarding the sources used, and an understanding of the conditions under which they have been created. Thus, the reliability of the sources must be critically examined. The conclusions made by the researcher must not exceed the information that the sources actually provide. When using the narrative form to present research results one must be very conscious of preventing the drive of storytelling from

taking priority over critical analysis.

Historical research has sometimes been criticised by social scientists as being limited to providing theoretically uninteresting and insignificant particular descriptions of particular events of the past (see, e.g., Levi 1992, 96; Peltonen 1992, 8-10; Skocpol 1984, 362-363; Trimberger 1984, 227). A conceptual, and by definition a more general, understanding of social processes has been claimed to be a characteristic of social science. It is interesting that case studies have also been subjected to the same type of critiques, in which it is said that a case study does not allow its findings to be generalised to other settings (see, e.g., Stoecker 1991, 91; Yin 1984, 21). Nowadays, this criticism towards historiography is nevertheless mainly outdated and ungrounded, as the discipline itself strives to obtain a theoretical understanding of the past. Social history and historical sociology have in practice become so close to each other that many social scientists (e.g. Abrams 1982) claim that history and social science are actually one and the same.

Another question is whether or not historical studies can be referred to as case studies. Yin's (1984, 23) definition of case study is limited to an investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Although Stake disagrees with Yin in almost all other respects, this is a view shared by both of them. He joins Yin in excluding history from case studies (Stake 1994, 245). Stoecker (1991, 97-98), however, defines case study as distinctly including those research projects which attempt to holistically explain the dynamics of a certain historical period of a particular social unit. Thus, according to him, a historical research project could very well be called a case study. I fully agree with Stoecker in this respect. In a way, he is supported by C. Wright Mills (1959, 145) who argues that every social science requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical material. Correspondingly, Philip Abrams (1982, 2, 8) writes that sociological explanation is necessarily historical. These views are in sharp contrast with Yin's notion of 'the dead past', and also call into question his and Stake's practice of excluding the study of the past from the case study.

As in any historical research, description is essential in local historical case studies. Local events and processes are reported by describing them, and this is often done in the form of a chronological narrative in which events are described in their sequential order. The question is really not whether local historical case studies should be descriptive or

not, but rather what kind of description they should use. In order to be able to offer a social scientific contribution, a local historical case study must ask theoretical questions of its sources, and use them in order to get theoretical answers (Stoecker 1991, 101). The methodological guideline of the English historian E.P. Thompson (1978, 230-231; Trimberger 1984, 227) was to use theoretical ideas in dialogue with the evidence to interpret particular historical processes.

Doing a local case study means restricting the research to a specific local context. As with any case study, research questions may be broad and theoretical, but their answers are hoped to be found in a specific locality. Clifford Geertz (1973, 20-25) has argued that anthropologists do not study villages, but in fact study *in* villages. Giovanni Levi (1992, 95-98) has confirmed that the same applies to microhistory. In microhistory, the scale of observation is reduced, but the micro-analysis serves as the starting point towards far-reaching theoretical generalisations. In the same way, Risto Alapuro, a historical sociologist who has studied political mobilisation in a Finnish agrarian locality in the beginning of the 20th century, has said that he aimed at studying political mobilisation not *of* a locality, but *in* a locality (Alapuro 1994, 15). For him, the locality offered special local settings within which a general social phenomenon could be studied in great historical detail. With the results of his local historical case study, he could then criticise and develop the arguments of the existing theories on political mobilisation. Another example from Finland is Pertti Haapala's (1986) study, in which he discusses theories on the development of the working class by using the historical formation of the working class in Tampere as his historical case. There are many methodological differences between the studies of the above mentioned researchers, but nonetheless, their basic approach is the same: to study local events and processes in order to understand broader social phenomena.

There is also some disagreement among case study researchers as to whether comparisons should be included in the method (or frame, if you will) of case study. Stake (1994, 242) takes quite a definitive stand by claiming that comparative description is the opposite of 'thick description', which respects the uniqueness and complexities of an individual case. According to him, comparative research settings inevitably fix attention upon a few chosen attributes of a case, while obscuring other knowledge of them. Stoecker (1991, 98), too, has his own suspi-

cions about comparative case studies, warning that a comparative research design may easily lead to the loss of both the integrity and idiosyncrasies of each case, and also to the reduction of a case to a few comparable variables. Nevertheless, Stoecker considers the comparison of cases as both feasible and necessary. The necessity of comparisons in sociology is also strongly argued by Mills (1959, 146). According to him, comparisons are the means to getting beyond mere descriptions of social phenomena. This view is shared by many other historical sociologists who see comparisons as the real method to highlight the particular features of each case (Skocpol 1984, 370). Nevertheless, it is evident that there is a substantial risk of ignoring the uniqueness of each individual case in comparative research settings. Therefore, any comparative study that wishes to call itself a (multiple) case study must pay specific attention to the avoidance of this risk.

Next, I will illustrate the method of the local historical case study by presenting two individual case studies. Both of them focus on the emergence of local social care services in Finland, although their local contexts differ significantly from each other. My first study discusses the history of local service provision in an industrial locality, whereas the second study concentrates on the service development in a rural municipality.

## Case study 1: Local employer action and central government inaction in Säynätsalo

Säynätsalo is a small industrial community, situated on three islands in the central part of Finland, some 20 kilometres from the town of Jyväskylä. The case study reviews the main developments in local social services, from their early company-initiated origins in the early 20th century to the public provision of the 1990s. Several kinds of information sources were used. Previous writings on the history of the community and its industrial plants were found to be among the most useful sources. They include several more or less official histories of the local industrial company (Lehtiö 1922; Parviainen 1922; Jokipii 1929; Kuusi 1949; Hoving 1961; Sinkkonen 1990; Vuorenpää 1990), a new co-authored extensive history of the locality (Rautjoki 1994, especially

Jussila 1994), some research reports that focus on a specific period and feature of the history of the community (Hassinen 1983; Juurola 1966; Konttinen 1994; Koskimäki 1990; Mäkelä 1980; Rantanen 1976) and oral history recollections of local residents, which have been transcribed and published as an anthology (Rautjoki 1991). Some material from the archives of the local authorities, primarily local governmental annual reports from the years 1925 to 1992, complement the other sources.

### *The birth of a community*

An industrialist called Johan Parviainen bought the uninhabited and isolated main island of Säynätsalo from two local farmers in 1897. Parviainen already owned several industrial plants in the nearby town of Jyväskylä, but he dedicated the last part of his life to his most ambitious project, namely, the creation of 'a kingdom of his own' through the construction of an industrial community in Säynätsalo. In 1898, Parviainen opened a sawmill on the island. However, he did not live to see the realisation of his other plans. He died in 1900, whereupon his son, Hugo Parviainen, took over the company. In a matter of years he succeeded in expanding the sawmill, and also founded a brickyard, a planing mill and a coal mill in Säynätsalo. His most far-reaching decision, however, was to establish a plywood mill on the island. When it began operations in 1914 it was one of the first of its kind in Finland. Now, at the end of the millennium, the plant is the oldest still-functioning plywood mill in the country (Kuusi 1949, 91-122; Parviainen 1922, 43-53; Sinkkonen 1990, 7-11).

The industrial plants of the late 19th and early 20th century needed plenty of people to operate them. These people had to live somewhere and have food to eat. As the Säynätsalo mills were situated on an isolated island, the only feasible option was to accommodate the workers right there. The factory owner had to have quarters built for them and organise the delivery of provisions. The first settlers were mainly young men, and the living conditions were quite rough. However, especially after the plywood plant began its operations and employed many young women, families began to be formed and children to be born. The peak year was 1925, in which Säynätsalo had double the birth rate of the rest of central Finland. The following year the population of Säynätsalo exceeded a thousand (Rantanen 1976; Sinkkonen 1994). The in-



dustrial company did not obstruct this development. On the contrary, the Parviainen family, the company's sole owner, was notably active in supporting the emergence of this community. In addition to building houses and roads, the company began in the 1910s and 1920s to provide many community services; for example, it founded a primary school and police station, and also employed a doctor to make weekly visits to the island (Jokipii 1929; Kuusi 1949, 131-134). After Hugo Parviainen's death in 1920, this policy was continued by his brother, Walter. Similarly, after Walter's death in 1925, their sister, Hanna, Johan Parviainen's last surviving child, continued to increase the company's involvement in the community.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, a dynamic community was developed on the island of Säynätsalo. This process was directed in detail by the Parviainen family. Based on Walter Parviainen's initiative, Säynätsalo received administrative independence in 1924. Both the company and the residents of Säynätsalo had been dissatisfied with the parish and the rural district of Muurame, to which Säynätsalo belonged. Up until this point, Säynätsalo had been paying Muurame a considerable portion of its tax revenues, but receiving only minimal services in return. However, in order to become an independent local government unit, Säynätsalo first had to become a parish of its own. The company had promised to build a church for the new parish, and this promise was fulfilled in 1926 by Hanna Parviainen. Generally speaking, Hanna Parviainen's era was the heyday of social activities and responsibilities of the company (Jokipii 1929; Kuusi 1949, 139-152; Lehtiö 1922; Mäkelä 1980).

The Parviainen family contributed to the development of community services in Säynätsalo both through the resources of the company, as well as through their personal funds. In a way, there was no great difference between company and personal funds, as the majority of the family's property had come from the company. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that care services were established with the family's private funds. In 1924, Hanna Parviainen founded a kindergarten for children of the workers of the mills at her own expense. She named the kindergarten 'Marjala' after her mother, Maria Parviainen, who had recently passed away (Jokipii 1929, 41-45; Jussila 1994, 230-232). This may be understood as a sign of the personal significance that this project had to her. A local anecdote even describes Hanna Parviainen as being

more inclined to visit the kindergarten than the mills. Many mothers of small children were working in the plywood plant, and thus childcare facilities were needed in Säynätsalo. Nevertheless, the primary aim of the kindergarten was not to substitute the absent mothers, but rather to provide the workers' children with a half-day pre-school education that was based on patriotic and religious ideology. Thus, similarly to the education in the company primary school, the pre-school in Säynätsalo also strongly reflected the values of the bourgeois class, and certainly not the values of the working class. From early on, the kindergarten received a grant from the state to cover a third of its expenses. The condition of the central authorities for this grant was that the kindergarten not accept more than 75 children.

Also, the construction of the local residential home for older people was funded privately, through a donation from Walter Parviainen's widow. Walter Parviainen's last undertaking was the establishment of an institution for elderly residents of Säynätsalo. Previously, such an institution had not been necessary in Säynätsalo, as the majority of the incoming population were young. However, after almost 30 years since its inception, the first workers of the Säynätsalo mills had become elderly. At this time, Finnish industrial companies were held legally responsible for the lifetime maintenance of their retired workers. However, as the company houses were meant only for the active workforce, another solution for the accommodation and care needs of elderly workers had to be found. Walter Parviainen was a physician by trade, and his ambition was to create a modern institution based not on the tradition of poor relief, but on the use of medical science. Parviainen died before the building of the institution got underway, however, his sister realised his dream. The residential home was inaugurated at the same time as the church, 6th January 1927, and this day became the culmination of the period during which the community of Säynätsalo was ruled by the family Parviainen (Jokipii 1929, 96-103; Jussila 1994, 237).

The relationship between the Parviainens and the residents of Säynätsalo was two-sided. On the one hand, the members of the company-owning family clearly felt a deep responsibility for the local community, which from its establishment was their own construction. Especially for Hanna Parviainen, the welfare of the working class families was of utmost importance. On the other hand, the needs of the

residents were interpreted through the dominant bourgeois ideology. The local families did not have much to say about how the company organised its services, and thus, the company's social activities may also be seen as a method of social control. The Parviainens had the community and its residents firmly in their hands. They were in control of their workforce in as well as outside of the workplace. Radical leftist political activity was not allowed on the island, and instead of supporting a spontaneous working class culture, a nationalist upper-class culture was promoted in the community. Some historians have argued that the broad social activities of Finnish industrial companies in the 1920s and 1930s were primarily motivated by their economical and political interests. Through their charities, employers were able to reduce the probability of political unrest among the workers (Kettunen 1986). The Parviainen family clearly succeeded in gaining the loyalty of local residents, and even today, the memory of the family is still held in high regard in Säynätsalo.

### *The slow transfer of responsibility*

However, the period of the Parviainen family's rule came to an abrupt end in the early 1930s. The world-wide recession hit the company hard. Already before the recession, Hanna Parviainen had been criticised by the company's directors for putting too much time and resources into social activities, while neglecting to secure the company's financial foundation and develop its technological capabilities. The recession turned the profits of the company into huge losses, and its entire existence fell into jeopardy. The end result was that the financing banks took control of the company, and Hanna Parviainen was pushed aside in 1931. In practice, that ended the era of the Parviainen family in Säynätsalo. Eventually, in 1936, the banks completely bought Hanna Parviainen out of the company (Kuusi 1949, 160-172; Mäkelä 1980, 16-17; Vuorenpää 1990, 75).

The Bank of Finland began a large-scale modernisation programme of the Säynätsalo plants. Its director, Risto Ryti, the future president of the nation, was especially committed to restoring the profitability of the Säynätsalo mills. This investment programme also included starting the production of (to a high degree) ready-made single-family houses. The programme proved to be economically successful, and in

1947 the company was sold to Enso-Gutzeit Oy, the major timber consolidated company owned by the state (Hoving 1961, 712-725). Joh. Parviaisen Tehtaat Oy was merged with this large national company and lost its local character. Personal relations between the company owners and local residents were now history. Nevertheless, Enso-Gutzeit did not drastically reduce the social commitments of the company. Some basic functions were gradually transferred to the local authorities, but for a long time the company carried the main responsibility of community services in Säynätsalo (Juurola 1966, 9, 18).

In childcare, the company actually broadened its social activities. From the 1920s, the settlement had begun to spread to two other neighbouring islands, Muuratsalo and Lehtisaari. Here, trusted company employees had been given sites on which to build their own houses. A small kindergarten with 25 places was founded on Muuratsalo in 1938. Following the end of World War II, the late 1940s saw a very rapid increase in the local population. In the early 1950s, the number of residents exceeded 3,000. This figure is quite close to the local population in Säynätsalo today. The increase was due in part to migration to Säynätsalo, and also to the birth of the baby boom generation (Sinkkonen 1994). As a result, in 1951, the third island also got a child day care facility of its own. At the end of the 1940s the company asked the local authorities to share the responsibility for the kindergartens. From 1950 onwards, the municipality and the company jointly organised and funded the activities of the kindergartens with the support of central grants (Jussila 1994, 233-235). A couple of years later professional social work was established in Säynätsalo, as the first office employee began her work in the new social welfare office of the local authorities. Nevertheless, it would be more than a decade before the post would be filled by a professionally educated social worker.

In the 1950s, the central government began to interfere more actively in local child care provision. In 1957, the state refused to continue to support the Muuratsalo kindergarten, partly because the number of children had declined to under 25, and partly because it had experienced difficulties in employing qualified personnel. As a result, the day care unit was closed (Jussila 1994, 235). During the same decade, central and local authorities were also in dispute over the Lehtisaari kindergarten. The company and the municipality decided to experiment with full-day care and open a department for this in the Lehtisaari unit.

Due to the common full-day working of women at the mills, half-day care for children was not sufficient for all families in Säynätsalo. Locally this was understood, but at the central level the idea of full-day care was not accepted. The state did not support the full-day care department, however, the company and the municipality kept the department open and functioning regardless.

It was only in 1973 that the state changed its child day care policy and began to actively support the provision of full-day care in both day care centers and in family day care, in other words, childminders who were now employed by local authorities. This policy change finally brought an end to the long period of co-operation between the company and the municipality in childcare provision in Säynätsalo. The company upheld the Marjala and Lehtisaari kindergartens until 1977, at which point they were both closed, and a new public day care center was built and opened on the main island. This new childcare unit was entirely funded by local and central governments, and the majority of its 110 places were intended for full day-care. A few years later, local authorities in Säynätsalo began employing childminders as well. In the early 1990s, the other islands were once again given their own day care units. In Lehtisaari, a new mode of child day care called group family day care was established. The novelty of the unit was that childminders were not working alone in their own homes, as in the majority of family day care, but rather, in larger groups on public premises. In 1991, Muuratsalo was given a small-scale day care centre, an obvious successor of the kindergarten of the 1940s and 1950s (Jussila 1994, 235-236).

In Säynätsalo, care for older people became an integral part of municipal social welfare earlier than child day care. Although the Parviainen family funded the building of the residential home and had a large influence on its organisation, the institution was under the control of the local authorities from its inception. Although the local council and all municipal boards and committees were ruled by left-wing parties in Säynätsalo, the relations between the company and the municipality were not strained. Almost all councillors were employed by the company, and there was no room for hard criticism of its policies in the community. The recession of the 1930s resulted in a weakening of the ties between the residential home and the company. Legislation was changed to ease the burdens of companies in financial difficulties so

that their maintenance responsibilities for retired workers were reduced. Joh. Parviaisen Tehtaat Oy, which was now controlled by the banks, used this opportunity to cease funding of the care and accommodation of its retired personnel in the institution, whereafter local authorities were solely responsible for its maintenance (Jussila 1994, 237-238).

For a long time, the residential home was not in full use. Only after the war, in the 1950s, did it eventually prove its necessity. The older population suffering from serious illnesses was increasing at such a rapid rate that a special nursing ward was opened in the institution. In the early 1960s, a new main building was constructed in order to respond to these new demands. All of these developments occurred without substantial funding from the central authorities (Jussila 1994, 238).

In the early 1950s, the Säynätsalo authorities started providing home help services. This happened in accordance with national legislation and was supported by central grants. At first, only families with several children were to receive this service, but by the early 1970s older people had become the main recipients of home help. Home help received the status of being the other half of care services for older people (in addition to the residential home), and it also began to deliver supplementary support services. In the early 1990s, home help and the residential home increased their co-operation in Säynätsalo by opening a day center that was situated on the premises of the institution. The institution also developed its nursing capabilities, and this change in the institution's profile was expressed by the change of its name. The new name of the institution is 'Care Home Hannala', after Hanna Parviainen.

In 1994, the administration of care services in Säynätsalo went through a profound change. The municipality was merged with the town of Jyväskylä, and thus the small-scale local care services became a part of the social service department of Jyväskylä. This change was parallel to the seizure of the company by the banks in 1931; the community was stripped of its decision making power. Behind this dramatic decision to give up administrative independence was a complex process that began in 1990, when Enso-Gutzeit decided to sell its industries in Säynätsalo. The new owner of the plywood mill, Schauman Wood Oy, threatened to close down the mill unless Säynätsalo was merged with Jyväskylä. This extraordinary ultimatum was connected to a previous deal between Schauman Wood Oy and the authorities of

Jyväskylä concerning the end of production in another of the company's mills in the town. The residents of Säynätsalo were given a difficult choice: either to give up the mill or their independence. 73 per cent of votes gave priority to the mill. A Säynätsalo without its administrative independence was conceivable, a Säynätsalo without its industries was not.

What, then, are the results of this local historical case study? Summarising the service history in Säynätsalo, the central state did not play a major role in starting and developing most of the local social services. The industrial company performed the leading role by far. In the early part of the century its individual owners were the major players. From the 1920s onwards, these services were provided by a partnership between the company and the municipality. Gradually, the company became more willing to leave the primary responsibility to local authorities, although this did not happen in full before the 1970s. The municipality did not have adequate financial or other resources to take the main responsibility before it became heavily supported and directed by the central government. This happened only during the expansion period of the welfare state in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Thus, central authorities did play a role in the history of social service provision in Säynätsalo, although for a long time this role was passive as opposed to active. Due to the lack of central commitment to social services, the shift of responsibility from the industrial company to the municipality was delayed by decades. When central authorities finally began to support local governments to a considerable extent, the Säynätsalo municipality used the new central grants to adopt the welfare services which had previously been supported by the company. Since then, the role of the company in service provision has become marginal, and the development has been guided by co-operation between central and local governments. The relations between the central and Säynätsalo authorities have nevertheless remained quite amicable. Säynätsalo was never subjected to very stringent central measures, as it had already built up the services that the central state was eagerly trying to promote from the late 1960s on. The major disputes between the central and local levels preceded the period of the expanding welfare state and mainly involved local agents who were trying to develop and renew service provision.

The main findings described in the narrative were the decisive and

enduring role of the industrial company in creating community services, including both kindergarten activities for young children and care for older people, as well as the slow and gradual process by which responsibility for these services was transferred from the company to local authorities. In this community, local action proved to have preceded central action. This is something that is excluded from most theories on the welfare state.

## Case study 2: Local confrontation and delayed central government action in Saarijärvi

The other case study focuses on the emergence process of publicly provided child day care services in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Saarijärvi. Saarijärvi is a municipality encompassing a large area, most parts of which are sparsely inhabited. Its population has remained between 10,000 and 12,000 throughout the entire post-war period. Saarijärvi is situated in the middle of a large rural area in the northern part of central Finland. The locality consists of several villages which have historically been the centres of social life. The post-war trend has nevertheless been towards centralisation within Saarijärvi. The downfall of agriculture as the main source of livelihood in the 1960s started a migration from other villages to the administrative and commercial central village. However, it must be stated that it was only in the mid-1970s that agriculture and forestry finally lost their role as the primary industries in Saarijärvi. Unlike the traditional villages, the central village began to attract both small- and middle-scale manufacturing and service industries. At the beginning of the 1960s, the central village was inhabited by only a sixth of the population of Saarijärvi, but two decades later it had already gathered almost half of all residents of the locality (SVT VI C: 103-106). Nevertheless, these remarkable social changes did not change the local political power structure. Perhaps the inertia of cultural change is reflected in the fact that the agrarian Centre Party was still the primary player in local politics in Saarijärvi in the 1970s.

The local newspaper and the archival documents of the local authorities made up the main information sources of the case study. The significance of these sources was also compounded by the fact that



very few previous writings describing the history of social services in Saarijärvi existed. The newspaper Sampo provided first-rate information on both local events and on the ongoing structural modernisation process of the locality, but its writings also reflected changes in local opinions. I thoroughly examined the volumes dating from 1965 to 1975. The archives of the Saarijärvi municipal authorities included material such as correspondence between central authorities, inspection reports, circulars and minutes from the meetings of the social welfare committee, the municipal board and the local council.<sup>1</sup> The minutes of the meetings of these three municipal organs were given the most detailed attention. Every section of the minutes which touched on the issue of children's day care between the years 1964 and 1976 was analysed. Other archival materials were used to give additional and more detailed background information about the issues that were discussed in the minutes. All of this material provided a great amount of information on local policy-making processes, and also on the interaction between the local and central governments. Certainly other kinds of data could have been collected and used as well. For example, it could have been possible to interview those people who were heavily involved in the policy-making process, and who were still alive during my research process. However, I decided to concentrate on utilising the information contained in the primary archival and newspaper sources as fully as possible.

### *A radical initiative*

The key agent in the emergence process of social care services in Saarijärvi was Taimi Sarkki, the female social welfare manager of the municipality (literally, her title was 'social secretary', which was the usual title for such a post in rural municipalities in Finland at the time). She was a professionally educated social worker who worked extremely persistently to broaden the activities of municipal social welfare from the traditional methods of financial assistance, social control and institutional care towards more universal service provision. Sarkki was not a local resident by birth, as she came to her post from outside of the community in 1953. She held her position for 25 years, almost until the time of her death.

The initiation of children's day care in Saarijärvi was a difficult proc-

ess. After the war, kindergartens were still extremely rare in rural areas. In towns and industrial communities they were already an accepted and respected part of child welfare provision, although even there the aim of kindergartens was more to function as a preventive method of child protection than to serve the needs of families in which both parents (or the sole parent) were in paid work. Nevertheless, there was a significant difference in the attitudes of local decision-makers towards day care services between urban and rural municipalities. Thus, in 1962, when Taimi Sarkki wrote about the situation in Saarijärvi in the leading professional social welfare magazine in Finland, stating that 'a day care centre for the children of working mothers was already needed in the central village', her words were quite radical (Sarkki 1962, 498).

The first time the term 'child day care' appears in local authority documents of Saarijärvi is in 1964, when Sarkki attended a seminar in Helsinki at which the initiation of day care in rural municipalities was discussed. In connection with this, the social welfare committee of the municipality stated that organising day care services for children was topical, and also necessary in Saarijärvi. The following year, on the initiative of the welfare committee, the local council appointed a commission to investigate the need for starting the municipal provision of day care. In addition to the issue of children's day care, this commission, which included Sarkki and two male members of the municipal board, was to also provide its proposals both on the future development of home help services, and on the housing conditions and care of older people. However, the commission ultimately decided that children's day care was the most urgent issue.

According to an inquiry organised by the commission, 32 under school-age children were in need of day care services in the central village. Their mothers were in paid work and had considerable difficulties in organising day care for them. Throughout the entire debate, nothing was ever mentioned regarding whether or not the fathers of these children were employed. It was generally assumed that the fathers of small children were in paid work, which was not the case with regard to the mothers' employment status. According to the commission, the problem in need of a solution was childcare in families in which women were forced to take paid work out of financial necessity. Thus, providing child day care became defined as a social problem of

single mothers and indigent married couples. The commission paid visits to kindergartens in nearby towns and industrial localities, but rejected them as potential models for day care services in Saarijärvi. Kindergartens provided pedagogically oriented half-day care, and were understood to be a kind of pre-school, not the kind of socially motivated full-day care that was needed in Saarijärvi. Another disappointment for the commission was the realisation that no financial support was available from the central authorities to organise full-day care provision while kindergartens were simultaneously receiving a third of their expenses from the state.

The commission also discussed the possibility of paying mothers to stop working, although it was suspected that the process of deciding which mothers should or should not receive a such benefit could become quite difficult. Even without offering the benefit – a ‘mother’s wage’ as it was called – to all mothers of small children of the locality, it was feared that it would become quite costly. It was also argued that while being at home, the women would lose their professional competencies, which in turn would complicate their re-entering the work force in the future. The commission was equally sceptical about privately run day care centres. It argued that these institutions are often taken over by local authorities as a result of their rising costs. In a profit-making day care centre, fees would inevitably become so high that poor families could not afford to utilise its services. These centres would also probably have difficulties in maintaining a high standard of care. And even a non-profit institution could potentially be problematic, as its operation would not be under the local authority’s control. The commission ended up suggesting that the municipality start a day care centre of its own for 25 children aged between 1 and 7 years. The day care centre would offer full-day care and be open from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.

This was a radical proposal in Saarijärvi, and it received quite a mixed reception. Even the commission itself had not been unanimous on the issue. One of its two male members did not support the initiation of a local authority day care centre for fear that its costs would cause the council to raise the local tax rate. Another argument of his was that a day care centre would only benefit the residents of the central village, while the residents of the surrounding villages would be deprived of a comparable advantage. These were the two counter-arguments to municipal day care that were to be repeated over and over again during the

next years. The proposal of the commission was defeated by a narrow margin in both the municipal board and the local council. In the social welfare committee, the representatives of the Centre Party supported the starting of the day care institution, but the same party rejected the proposition in the upper bodies. Both left-wing parties, the Social Democrats and the socialists, were in favour of the proposition, but the representatives of the right-wing conservative party were opposed to it. The proposition lost by one vote in the municipal board, and by three votes in the local council.

### *The final breakthrough of child day care*

A similar process took place the following year, when the social welfare committee suggested a very modest grant with which it would be able to organise basic training for self-employed childminders, and compensate a share of the fees that poor families had to pay them. This time the proposition won the majority in the council by one vote. Nevertheless, the council made a peculiar decision that in this case the proposition would require the 'qualified majority'. In other words, it would have required two-thirds of given votes behind it in order to be approved. During the following years, several similar acts were played out in the governmental bodies of Saarijärvi. The social welfare committee proposed various initiatives and tried to suggest everything from starting municipal family day care to supporting financially home care for children or private day care centres. However, all of these propositions were definitively rejected by the municipal board and the council, in practice, by the local Centre Party.

In 1972, the sustained attitude of Taimi Sarkki and her welfare committee finally culminated into action. All the bodies unanimously agreed to start municipal family day care in Saarijärvi in the autumn of 1973. Now that the door was open, the welfare committee decided to go even further. Sarkki and her committee stated that family day care, that is, publicly employed childminders, may serve the other villages well, but that there was a crucial need for a day care centre in the central village. This proposition also succeeded, and the first day care centre in Saarijärvi opened its doors to children in June 1974.

I have analysed this policy process in light of the structural changes that were going on in the locality. The status and future of the tradi-

tional villages became seriously questioned in the 1960s, when agriculture, the old economical basis of Saarijärvi, was challenged by new industries. The Centre Party was an interest group of farmers, and as such it attempted to protect them and their villages against powerful social changes. In this process the central village came to be portrayed as a kind of adversary whose development should be opposed in order to maintain the previous balance of power in the locality. The fate of child day care was that it was understood to benefit only the wage-earning population of the central village whose interests were politically represented by the minority left-wing parties. The idea of organised day care provision for children also challenged the traditional agrarian family model in which women worked on family farms, but generally did not receive individual income and thus were not economically independent. The local Centre Party saw women's paid work as something that should not be actively promoted by the municipality through the organisation of child day care services.

What then makes the breakthrough of day care in 1972 understandable? In other words, what explains the volte-face of the Centre Party? I can see three explanations. The first is undoubtedly the work of Taimi Sarkki. In a way, she was a forerunner who as early as the early 1960s attempted to promote the transformation of the old social welfare system into more multi-dimensional services that would include a greater proportion of the population. Central authorities adopted this view only at the turn of the 1970s, although the Municipal Home Help Act of 1966 already reflected these ideas. However, Sarkki was visibly ahead of the state in seeing the increasing need for full-time day care for small children. She was able to convince the social welfare committee of the need for day care in Saarijärvi, but had considerable difficulties with the upper local government bodies of the municipality. Thus, her efforts evidently were a necessary yet insufficient condition in the breakthrough of child day care.

Another explanation is a gradual change of opinion among farmers toward the manufacturing and service industries. A greater risk than migration to the central village appeared; total migration from Saarijärvi to towns in southern Finland. Agriculture and forestry could no longer provide sufficient livelihood to the majority of the population, and during the late 1960s and early 1970s many rural municipalities lost a significant part of their population, as working-age people moved away

in search of employment. If Saarijärvi hoped to avoid the realisation of the worst case scenario, in which young, tax-paying families moved away from the locality leaving only the poor and the elderly behind, it was imperative that new industries be introduced into the locality. In order to promote these industries and to keep them in Saarijärvi, active policies were required (cf. Rannikko & Pyy 1994, 81). These policies could even include day care provision for small children. Saarijärvi was given a practical lesson on this topic in 1973. A local company with textile industries was extending its production and was therefore trying to find additional female workers. It failed in its search, and had severe problems even keeping its existing workers. The company complained that women in Saarijärvi tended to stay at home after having children. As a result, the company took its new production line to another locality, and Saarijärvi was left without new jobs and tax revenues.

However, the third explanation is perhaps the strongest. It might be a little disappointing for a study that explicitly focuses on local processes that this explanation comes from outside Saarijärvi. It is the total change in child day care policies of the central government that is in question. In 1973, by passing the Children's Day Care Act, the national government began an energetic project to construct a nation-wide network of full-day care provision for young children. This forthcoming policy change was well known by local policy-makers of Saarijärvi in 1972.

The central authorities were suspicious as to whether or not rural municipalities would join this endeavour without major incentives (Kröger 1996, 64). The state decided to take part by funding rural day care provision by up to 80 per cent of the total costs. The attraction of this offer was remarkable. In addition to this grant, rural local authorities would receive service fees from the families and local taxes from the day care personnel. In practice, rural municipalities were given new services and jobs for free. Not even the Centre Party in Saarijärvi could resist such an offer. In fact, the party listed the creation of day care services as one of its major achievements in 1973 in Saarijärvi.

Thus, this case study comes to a somewhat contradictory conclusion. In the early 1960s, the welfare authorities of Saarijärvi were actively looking for models of full-day care for children that could be adapted to serve the needs of a changing rural locality. However, at

that time they were provided with no ideas, no professional backing and no financial support from central authorities. In a rural municipality governed by traditional cultural assumptions and agrarian politics, the inclusion of the interests of working mothers in policy-making proved to be extremely difficult without external support. The families of Saarijärvi had to wait for this support to come for more than a decade. However, when central policies were finally reformed in the early 1970s, they did give a major push to the local decision-making process. From then on, local and central politicians and officials worked together to create extensive child day care services for wage-earning families. Politically, left-wing parties did not succeed in starting day care provision at the local level before the same parties reformed central policies at the national level. It is also interesting that after the Centre Party was defeated at the national level and the legislative foundation of the public child day care system became established, the same party finally became sympathetic to service provision at the local level. All in all, the relationship between the central and local levels proves to be of utmost importance in this particular case. This holds true as well for the administrative sphere as the political sphere. These relationships have been discussed very rarely and inadequately in previous research on the history of the welfare state in Finland.

## Conclusions

Local historical case studies can either support previous sociological theories or bring them into question. Thus, they can be used in order to establish limits to grand generalisations (Stake 1994, 245). Nevertheless, their most important function is perhaps their potential to raise new ideas for prospective theoretical work. Detailed analyses of local events may uncover new phenomena, and they may also observe new connections between previously known phenomena that more generally orientated studies have left unnoticed (Levi 1992, 97-98). Specific local case studies are often the only means of acquiring an integral view of the profound social changes which permeate the different levels of society (Manninen 1988, 77). The results of these studies may provide grounds for the formation of new concepts (Peltonen 1992, 9).

Nevertheless, case study meets its limits in theory construction. A

case study may initiate a new theory, however, no theory that is based solely on the results of a single case can claim to possess general relevance. If a case study is able to present an anomaly, former theoretical constructions can be questioned. But no general rule can be made based on a single case, or even on several cases. The most that can be stated is that a particular case seems to support a particular theory, however, it is impossible to determine whether or not other cases will do the same. Theoretical conceptions may be created and presented on the basis of case studies, but it will be left to further research to decide their usefulness.

Each study has to adapt the general principles of the case study frame to the specific questions and aims of the concerned research project. These choices have important implications for the research, opening up some opportunities while simultaneously closing others. My two local historical case studies are different versions of the method. They have different focuses and use different kinds of sources. Correspondingly, these differences in method led to narrative differences. The Säänätsalo study provides a very general description of the development of the local social services over an extended period of time. Individual local events were not analysed in detail, as the narrative concentrates on the main development lines and their turning points. The Saarijärvi case study limits itself to a much shorter time period. The time period studied in the latter case is only ten years, compared with an entire century in the first case. The Saarijärvi study is also more restricted in another sense. It confines itself to analysing the development of one specific service, day care for young children, whereas the first case study includes the whole social welfare sector. With its more limited focus, the second case study is able to scrutinise in greater detail than the first. Nevertheless, both of the two studies are genuinely local historical case studies, as they examine past policy-making processes and central–local interplay from a local perspective, and study general social phenomena in unique local contexts.

What theoretical contribution if any do my two local historical case studies have to give? First of all, the two studies prove that local policy-making does matter. In Finland, as in many other countries, social policy research has traditionally focused on developments in national policy, that is, on national political processes, legislation and expenditures. The history of the welfare state has usually been written as a national narra-



tive. This approach has been appropriate in discussing the development of different benefit policies, as they have mainly been formed at the national level and are often implemented by national social insurance institutions. However, the national approach proves to be problematic where social care services are concerned, as they are usually provided not by national authorities but by local authorities. Local government has been responsible for the implementation of social service policies and, in practice, it has often had considerable discretion in doing so. Although central decisions have powerfully formulated the general trend of policy, local decision-making has had at least some influence on the eventual form of service provision.

The Säynätsalo case study raised an issue that has mainly been neglected in Finnish histories of social policies. That is, the service provision of employers, especially in industrial communities. Previously, the development of social services was understood almost as a synonym for the development of publicly provided social services. Thus, for a long time, poor relief was seen as the sole historical root of modern service provision. From the 1980s on, feminist scholars have questioned this view and argued that it is actually the activities of voluntary organisations, often led by female activists, that are the real historical predecessors of the current public care services (Julkunen 1987, 32-33; Saarinen 1985, 44-86 & 1995). Others have argued that even now, the majority of care provision work is done informally, within 'the invisible welfare state' (Anttonen 1988 & 1989; Julkunen 1989). As a result of this research, informal and voluntary care are currently well included in the history of social care (e.g., Satka 1994 & 1995). Nonetheless, until now, employer services have not received the attention they would have been worthy of in welfare state histories. In localities such as Säynätsalo these services have been extremely decisive for the whole development of social care. Thus, their inclusion in welfare state research could change, or at least broaden the general understanding of the historical origins of universal social service policies in Finland.

The other case study provided a detailed description of a crucial period in the development of children's day care services. The development of children's day care in Saarijärvi differs completely from the corresponding development in Säynätsalo. In the Finnish context, these services are the most central part of social service provision, and they

currently utilise approximately half of the total resources of all social services. The study highlighted the importance of a single social worker functioning as a significant agent promoting change in local policy-making. In the study, however, her actions are viewed within their social contexts. The study argues that the ongoing overall transition of the local social structures remarkably influenced the contents of local politics, polarising the policy-making scene to a struggle between the central and surrounding villages.

In principle, even general sociological theories of the relations between individual action and social structures could be addressed with this particular case study. Here, such an ambitious effort will not be attempted. The point is only to show that individual local historical case studies that are limited to particular local events and particular local contexts do contain vast theoretical potential. On the one hand, one observation from this specific case study to previous welfare state histories is that rural localities differ from one another and are unique in their reception of central policies. To a large extent, local social and political structures influence the process, and whether or not centrally created plans will actually be implemented at the local level. On the other hand, this case study confirms that central action was necessary in order to establish the provision of modern universal care services in a rural municipality which represented the agrarian legacy of mainstream Finnish history.

All in all, combined with the presented methodological discussion, the two case studies with their different focuses and practices may in fact show that local historical case study is more a basic orientation to the study of a societal history than a uniform research method. The main idea is to look at history from the local level, to analyse the developments that have taken place in localities using local sources. However, local events are not seen as isolated, but rather as closely connected to the larger spheres of society. In principle, studying the history of the social welfare system is no different than studying the history of any other aspect of society. In the history of social services, local historical case studies are able to prove the importance of local action. Behind local action there are always many different local agents, and often this action can be understood as resulting from local power struggles. In some cases local action has promoted central policies, while in others it has resisted them. In any case, the relationship be-

tween the central and local levels has been significant. As a result of this interplay, the care services have acquired both locally unique and nationally general characteristics. Using the frame of the local historical case study, these two characteristics can be analysed separately from each other. However, with local historical case studies, a general theory of the unique may remain out of our reach.

## Note

1 In the Finnish local government system, as a directly voted organ, the local council has superior decision making power in a municipality. The municipal board is an executive organ that is directly subordinate and responsible to the council, although in practice it enjoys quite an extensive amount of power. The social welfare committee, which until 1993 was statutory in every municipality, is responsible for organising local social services. Both the municipal board and the social welfare committee are appointed by the local council. Their members may or may not be councillors themselves (for a more detailed presentation of local governmental administration structures in Finland, see Hakamäki & Harisalo & Hoikka 1988 or Ståhlberg & Oulasvirta 1996).

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## II

# DIFFICULT OBJECTS, NEW QUESTIONS



*Riitta Granfelt*

## STORIES ABOUT HOMELESSNESS AND MARGINALISATION

Quantitatively, women's homelessness is a marginal phenomenon in social politics. However, women's homelessness clearly manifests the hardness of marginalisation in the life of a poor, lonely woman with psychosocial problems. A phenomenon is scientifically and socio-politically relevant even when it concerns a small group only: the margin can offer a good view of women's poverty and marginalisation in general.

Women's homelessness manifests itself in many ways. Within a short period of time, a woman can be homeless in many ways. In Finland, women's homelessness typically does not mean living in the street or in night shelters. Homeless women generally stay at public dormitories with a more or less treatmental purpose or as guests of relatives, friends and occasional male friends, so many of them are not represented by statistics about the homeless.

Women, homelessness and alienation constitute the triangle that I had in mind when I started to visit dormitories in order to interview women concerning their lives. During the interviews, these women lived in dormitories for the homeless or in homes for alcoholics and drug abusers. Many of the women had severe alcohol problems; some were drug abusers. Homelessness and problems with intoxicants were at that time, also often in former life, entwined, which made these problems even harder.

Even during the first encounters, the basic question turned out to be who these women actually are, what are my chances of 'entering' their world and what would be the right words for describing their lives. Homelessness is a reality common to these women, but they talked about many other things as well: children, men, alcohol, violence, work, their dreams and their fears. In each story, homelessness emerged differently, in terms of the woman's life and personality.

Most of the women were mothers whose children had been taken away from them. Quite a few told about broken relationships, violence and dependency from groups with intoxicant problems. Homelessness and loss of home were often associated with unstable and terminating personal relations and the increasing doubt about the meaningfulness of life. Loss of home meant much more than merely loss of dwelling. In the stories of homeless women, different aspects of life as action and experience became entwined into a many-layered whole.

## Looking for words

I have rewritten the women's stories by organising them in terms of three themes: Broken motherhood, Worlds of violence and Drinking life. These themes are in a close relation to the women's words and main stories. These thematic entities are based on the concept of marginalisation, which here covers not only socioeconomic poverty, psychosocial problems and existential crisis but also creative ways of coping, which is characteristic of minority groups, and the women's wisdom that could benefit even the dominant cultures.

Firstly, I have tried to use concepts that are not too distant from the expressions used by the women, but that summarise and clarify the main themes of their stories. Secondly, I have associated the women's stories with human issues in general: the experiences of being different and an outsider, the loss of the meaning of life, the themes of brokenness, reformation and caring. A conceptual search continued during the whole study. This made it easier to better understand the women's stories, which often inspired me to consider theoretical and methodological questions and literature that I had not originally had in mind.

The theory of my study, fully reported in my doctoral thesis (Granfelt 1998), is based on three concepts: marginalisation, homelessness

and the holding environment. These concepts became increasingly substantial in the course of the study. The women's stories could have been analysed with other concepts too, but I have chosen concepts that have aided my theoretical thinking and that have a close correspondence to the women's stories.

All the concepts I chose are suggestive and theoretically open: the margin is a small narrow area close to the edge. Homelessness means straying in the dark, insecurity and distress. The holding environment refers to caring and to a bounded, familiar space. All this and much else came up when the women talked about their homes and loss of home, loss of children to authorities, longing for their children, violent relations, life in alcoholic groups, and being a client of social and health care authorities.

## Constructing stories

My starting-point is that the women have described and interpreted their lives interactively with me. Together we have constructed stories based on the lives of homeless women. My role here has been to enable and restrict. I believe a researcher cannot help the narrator to tell the story if she cannot identify with the subject matter. Following Susan Chase's (1995, 2-14) phrase, I have tried to 'invite stories': to help women assume the role of the narrator and concentrate on themes they really would like to tell about. My theoretical starting-points and personal background have steered the interaction and the stories. When analysing the stories, I have told the women's stories to myself over and over again to make them live and speak in my mind. The empirical data consists of narrated and interpreted lives. On the basis of this data and relevant literature, I have built a three-dimensional picture of homelessness and the home which exists in terms of living conditions, social relations and one's personal, internal world.

From her own starting-points, the researcher creates an interpretation of homelessness and, at the same time, her study-object. One can write stories about homeless with very different emphases. No-one, except the homeless themselves, have the one important ingredient from their interpretations and writings, namely the personal experience of homelessness. One cannot write about homelessness without hearing about

it from the homeless. I have tried to create an intensive interaction with the women in order to better identify myself with their stories. In this way, I have attempted to understand the world and situations about which the women have told. My goal has been to build a common space that primarily consists of the lives the women have told about; this world I, with my own background, approach, steered by my theoretical starting-points.

One could categorise the women telling about their homelessness in many ways. However, I have not tried to do this; rather, I have tried to write about them and their lives so that the women live in the text as the personalities that they are, with their characteristic thinking and speaking habits. But have I understood anything at all about their lives? I have not lived where they have more or less temporarily lived. I cannot claim to know what it really feels like to sleep under a boat turned upside-down, in a space for bank automata, or in a dormitory for sixteen persons. In my fantasies and attempts to identify myself with the women's stories, especially life in the street and in dormitories has appeared to me as frightening, even horrifying. It has been difficult for me to imagine how I would cope in circumstances that have been a reality for the women. This point is also made by a woman called Soile, who participated in the study:

*Riitta*: "I wonder... is there anything I've forgotten to ask? Anything you'd like to tell me?"

*Soile*: "Well I was just thinking, how could you... could you live the life I've lived? That you'd just suddenly find yourself in a situation like that? So that you'd lose you home, everything, you'd be all broke?"

*Riitta*: "Like being on the street?"

*Soile*: "Yea, I just wanted to know. It's just so awfully difficult – though I'm telling it here. It's not the same, how do you say it, it's not the same when you've not experienced it yourself. You can't, you can't, you can't get it. You can't even imagine what it can be like!"

*Riitta*: "How can you be so sure that I can't even imagine it?"

*Soile*: "Dunno. I just thought or that's what I felt like or ... Well, perhaps somehow. How should I put it: living in the street, bumming, living there, staying alive. No, I just feel you haven't got an idea about it."

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993) suggest that the researcher gives up the so-called fictive sympathy, the fantasy that we understand. They encourage the researchers to make themselves vulnerable in that the people studied are allowed to voice their opinions about the correctness of the researcher's assumptions and interpretations. Stanley and Wise express this principle as follows: "We cannot claim to know the feelings of a paralysed person; instead we can tell what we imagine we'd feel if it were our reality". (Op.cit. 167-169.)

Stanley and Wise (1993) emphasise the subjectivity of all knowledge and the importance of the need for the researcher to explicate her own position. Thus the starting-point is the reality as construed by the researcher, so the researcher does not claim that she knows the other's feelings. Instead, her task is to write her own reconstruction about the experiences of the persons studied. Depending on the researcher's starting-points, some issues get more emphasis than others; some are ignored altogether. Thus all knowledge turns out to be contextually conditioned and constructed. The researcher's concepts are tools of seeing and interpreting. Her personal history and personality influence the way in which she interprets the concepts, the way she conducts her theoretical analysis and what she can perceive in her data. (Op.cit. 167-169; also cf. Kiianmaa 1993, 18; Saarenheimo 1997, 27-28.)

What is at stake is dissolving hierarchies in the study: the people studied can voice their opinions about the correctness of the researcher's views, in this way supplementing and deepening it with their empirical knowledge. One can speak of connected or incremented knowledge: knowledge 'pierces' the knower, i.e. renders the researcher's understanding open to doubt (Belenky et al. 1997, 115-130). In this way, the researcher can partake in the thinking and world of the persons studied. When these knowledges meet, the researcher and the person studied can share a certain space which enables the construction of a shared story. Interactively construed knowledge and understanding can no longer be fully reduced to the knowledge or understanding of one or the other.

The human relations issues common to everyday relations also emerge in client and research relations. Though they are formed for a particular purpose, qualitatively they are not particularly special.

*Riitta*: "Do you think it's important that you are with people with experiences like yours?"

*Saara:* “Yes, I think so. So that all have experienced the dark sides of life... One’ll quite soon see whether the other starts to look down on you or something like that, it won’t be a long chat, that. At least it’s so with me. It’s easy to see if ones been through hard times... It depends on the person. Though one can get on well enough with a person who’s always been a teetotaller. Depends much on the person. Everyone’s got their own experiences.”

I have tried to use the so-called standpoint setting (Smith 1987; also e.g. Pohjola 1994, 32; Ruoho 1990, 3-4), where the central starting-point is everyday life’s experiences, from which theoretical concepts are derived. It is essential that homeless women are present in the study – thinking, feeling and active people living their lives – on the basis of whose accounts I have made the study. A central part of the study is interpretations based on the women’s stories. My conceptual analysis and resultant discussion is not always based on data, but in most cases there is a close connection to the women’s stories.

Dorothy Smith (1987) emphasises how easily theories and their application in the analysis of the data lose what is local and specific, actually everything whereby people could identify themselves and their lives. In these kinds of research texts, no-one is present any more; it is the concepts that dominate, distant and alien to life. I have tried to use concepts that do not objectivise homeless women but that, on the contrary, emerge from their reality and expressions to identify the essential in their stories. Trying to find the right words, I have tried to identify the central contents of the women’s stories, the nuances and relations between things and events. A researcher cannot give an ultimate, unambiguous and consistent account of reality. Therefore I believe that the women tell about things important to themselves, wishing to become understood.

The group I use in my study consists of a selected subset of a small group. My interest is dual. Firstly, I am interested in homelessness and marginalisation in women’s lives. Secondly, on the basis of the women’s stories and relevant literature I have tried to understand living in the margin, the state of being different, loss of control over one’s life, and gradual restructuring as basic questions of social work and of life itself. From this starting-point, I have firstly examined homelessness as a three-level phenomenon. Secondly, I have analysed marginalisation not



only as a socioeconomic process but also as an existential and psychological question. In the analysis of the data, I have also used Winnicott's (1971; 1986) concept 'holding environment'. The basic quality of the holding environment is support; it means creativity, a new kind of thinking and a state where new ways of seeing are possible.

My starting-point is thoroughgoing subjectivity. I have chosen a target group for which I care and which I find interesting. This has helped me identify myself and sympathise with the women's stories. Though there are things drastically different in the women's lives, I have also found in them something that seems familiar to me. The theoretical concepts that I have selected communicate not only with the data but also with me. In feminist research, the significance of the researcher's commitment and common experiences is of central importance. Commitment also becomes important when marginalised groups are studied: the responsibility of the researcher for those studied and the significance of shared experiences becomes crucial. On the other hand, extreme emphasis on the significance of one's personal experience results in a situation where everything but research based on one's own experiences becomes suspicious (Matero 1996, 259). Similar experiences are not necessarily profitable for research. On the contrary, it can result in excessive identification and tendentious writing. The researcher may find it difficult to acknowledge the persons studied as separate individuals with their own characteristics.

Living in similar conditions or experiencing the same phenomenon is not necessarily a key to another person's experience; it is important to identify not only similarities but also differences. This condition can be called connected knowledge, for the formation of which empathy is of central importance: personal experience is the basis which helps the researcher listen to the other person and understand how the other interprets reality (Belenky et al. 1997, 115-130).

## The living and feeling world of the stories

I have tried to get as far as possible into the specific, from which I have then tried to identify something general, theoretically interesting and relevant for different groups. I have depicted women's homelessness and marginalisation from one perspective, trying to be sensitive to the

difference between the narrators and the uniqueness of the stories. I have not tried to construct a single identity for homeless women; rather, I have tried to make a fragmentary picture of homelessness from differences and similarities. (Cf. Morell 1994; Pelkonen et al. 1994; Enoranta 1996, 131-142; Rojola 1996, 28-39.)

One of the main tasks of social political studies and especially social work studies is to bring into light information about the conditions of people living in difficult circumstances. A central ethical question then is, what kind of view the study renders of those studied and their reality. I have considered this question by using as tools of my thinking the expressions "A story of misery" and "A story of light". Unsurprisingly, a story of misery is characterised by an emphasis on misery in a general that is also characteristic of the people depicted. A story of light, in contrast, creates an idealised and romantic picture of the people involved. Idealisation results in unrealistic research text, so the reader's view of the people studied remains deceptive. It is difficult to identify oneself with a good or virtuous character; besides, this kind of character is hopelessly boring.

My goal has been to understand the women's stories so that my interpretation of them would be motivated by data and theory. By theoretical interest I mean the chance to identify meaningful generalisations at a level higher than the primary themes of this study. I have tried to make an empirical description of what it means to be a homeless woman in the Finnish society; I have also addressed some more general issues related to the human condition, which are observable from the women's stories, at least implicitly. (Cf. e.g. Silverman 1993, 2-3; Saarenheimo 1997, 27-29).

When studying the data, I have tried to identify myself with the women's stories, and I believe that I have understood their experiences. On the other hand, mental immersion in the stories has inspired thoughts and memories about my own life, so ultimately I have seen connections between individual experiences on the one hand and the human condition in general on the other. I have read my data several times. Yet I constantly find something new; constantly something new gets my attention; I often start to wonder, what is at stake. The stories are sufficiently different from my own life to challenge me emotionally and intellectually. On the other hand, they are familiar enough to enable me to identify myself with them. The women's stories are not scientific

texts; rather, they are renderings of experiences of different aspects of homelessness that inspire the researcher theoretically and methodologically.

Empathy means becoming emotionally touched while preserving one's separateness; momentary sharing, an experience of togetherness, yet simultaneously a respectful distance and appreciation of differences. Many feminist researchers have written about the significance of empathy not only during the collection of data but during the entire research process (e.g. Haraway 1992, 293; Josselson 1995, 28-32; Kaskisaari 1995, 16-22; Aro 1996; Jokinen 1996, 199-204; Vilkkö 1997, 184-190).

Empathy is a means to overcome distance, a means to understand another person's way of interpreting one's life and stories. However, it is not a sufficient condition for interpretations; it mainly deepens and supplements theoretical thinking (Saarenheimo 1988, 262). Even if the researcher does not consciously try to adopt an 'understanding' attitude, shared experiences during the research process can result in empathy and understanding. The emergence of empathy generally means that a particular phenomenon or way of acting starts to seem understandable in its context. The researcher starts to give new meanings to the phenomenon, so she makes a new kind of interpretation of it. Empathy emerges and lives as part of interaction, be the other party another person, a literary work of art, a research text, a movie etc. This phenomenon occurs at the boundary between empathy and separateness; what is at stake is becoming touched so that one's emotions and thinking are activated. Becoming touched is essential.

Conscious use of empathy is possible only when the researcher is not controlled by her emotions but can use her emotions for deepening and clarifying her understanding. Experiencing empathy does not necessarily mean strong emotional experiences; it can also result from careful thinking. An understanding research attitude presupposes concentrated, analytical thinking, so it cannot be entirely reduced to feelings. Empathy is a dialogue between emotions and thinking as well as a simultaneous dialogue between oneself and another person. It helps produce connected knowledge, a result of interaction. (Belenky et al. 1997, 115-130.)

The researcher can understand the phenomena she studies if the people who experience the phenomena tell her about them, and she

can attentively and emphatically listen to their stories. As a result of the empathic attitude, also black-and-white dichotomies become questionable: the stories are contradictory; so are the experiences and people. In this way also new, contradictory interpretations can emerge. One should not explain contradictions away; rather they are possibilities for continuing the stories and for understanding more. Maybe it is not so essential to find answers and explanations to everything. (Stanley and Wise 1993, 167-169; Josselson 1995, 28-33.)

The researcher is a part of the reality she studies, and her way of seeing, understanding and ignoring things is dependent on her personal life history and theoretico-methodological starting-points. Even very important parts of the data can remain unanalysed if the researcher cannot grasp them on the basis of her personal experiences and theoretical understanding. The researcher cannot bypass her feelings and commitments when conducting her study. The researcher's life history has an influence on all stages of the research process even though she may not be aware of it. It also influences her way of writing and her various substantial solutions irrespective of how 'objective' and 'hygienic' the study is intended to be. (Stanley and Wise 1993, 153-169.)

Donna Haraway (1992, 293) argues that the feeling of relatedness and empathy are necessary preconditions for the possibility that the researcher starts to understand the phenomena she studies (also cf. Jokinen 1996, 199-200). What empathy is about is the state of caring, which cannot be produced artificially. Compulsive trying and striving can prevent one from understanding. The emergence of understanding requires a freedom to think and feel; actually, a play-like spontaneous state (Winnicott 1971, 53-56; 1986, 41). Experiences common with those studied can help one to understand, but also the risk of seeing another's experience as one's own is involved. The most important thing is to attentively listen to the story-teller, to identify oneself with her situation and yet not to project one's personal properties to the other's story. This can also be called the attempt to respect another person's otherness (Myyrä 1993, 54).

Suffering can be heard and read from the stories of nearly all the women interviewed in my study. Some of the stories were rather shocking. Sometimes I could say nothing on my part; my own feelings were hard for me to handle, I felt helpless and clumsy. Especially when

collecting the data, I tended to think about the women even when I was not directly working with them. During later stages of the study, analysing and writing became more effortless and less constrained when I realised that, after all, I was not writing about the lives of these women in particular. My study does not create a world with real people and their experiences; rather, the study is something that I write on the basis of the women's stories. I could better immerse myself in the women's stories when I could sufficiently detach myself from them. My thinking and writing became more nuanced and unconstrained when I realised that I was using the women's stories for better understanding and making generally understandable the theme of my study, and that the main issue was not finding out whether I could agree with the women's stories at all points.

Questions directly arising from the researcher's theoretical thinking can become a barrier for the interviewee's own story, the story that she actually would like to tell. The best way of interviewing, therefore, is to make simple and clear questions about personal experiences. When interviewing, I have tried to make it possible to tell the stories in a relaxed and unconstrained manner. Other methods seem irrational because the whole study is based on the women's stories. Stanley and Wise (1993, 161) argue that research in general is based on interaction and a relation between the researcher and the people, books, archives etc. that are studied. Also my own experience suggests that the literature that has best benefited my study has had the best interaction with not only my data but also with me. These texts have given life to new stories in my mind, thus giving a direction to my study.

## Listening to the stories

I believe that all women voluntarily participated in my study, so the participation was not directly distasteful to anyone. The interviews were rewarding, touching and occasionally highly amusing. I believe that many of the women experienced the interviews rather like I did. Some of them described the situation as a chance 'to vent one's feelings' and 'to speak out one's mind'. Some experienced the feeling of being of use and help as very important.

The fact is, though, that the women asked nothing from me; rather,

I needed them and their stories. In a way, the setting turned upside down: the women's attitude to me and my study became rather empathic. They agreed to tell about very personal, touching and even painful experiences so that I could complete my study. Some expressed their concern quite explicitly:

“... so that you could make it as interesting as possible.”

“What will you become when you get this ready, a professor?”

“I told Timo (a social worker) that I can't tell about what's happened to me because Riitta seems to so timid and sensitive.”

The women were good tale-tellers; it was easy to follow their stories. They told about their lives; I listened, asked questions and in my imagination I saw them in the lives that they told about. As a result of listening, literacy and several readings, the interviews have become stories of the homeless women; stories where the narrator lives as the main protagonist and where there are several other persons in other roles. By concentrating on my role as a listener, I have tried to enter that narrated reality – to see in my mind the world and life that the narrator constructs in her tales. By monitoring my distance and closeness, I have tried to see in the narrated world also things other than what the narrator herself has seen or understood. I have regarded myself as a collaborator who has tried to facilitate the story-telling, though sometimes I may also have hindered it with poorly chosen phrasings and clumsy associations.

In the interviews, the women made interpretations of their lives, and I had a chance to check my interpretations with them. Some of the women, I interviewed two or three times; in these cases I was able to check my interpretations with the narrator herself. In the analysis itself, the women were no longer involved, rather, I have talked with them on the basis of the experiences their stories have transmitted, and in this way I have formulated my interpretations and thematic analyses.

The women's stories were highly different – all experiences were unique in spite of their thematic similarities. In many ways, my own life is different from the lives of the women in the study. It is not my task to assure that I nevertheless understood, that we had a lot in common, after all. The main criterion is whether the reader can enter the women's world on the basis of the story fragments and the inter-

pretations I have made about them; whether the stories touch the reader, and whether the reader grasps the general human significance of the stories that themselves concern specific situations and groups.

The literature I have used has considerably influenced what I have found and what I have paid attention to. At the same time, reading the data, thinking about the women's lives and general questions arising from these have guided my choice, analysis and understanding of literature. The researcher is in the position to prune; to make choices and emphases in the analysis of a single interview as well as of the whole data. The researcher's world view and manner of seeing things becomes a part of the data and influences the construct that she makes from the data for the reader. In analysing her data, the researcher re-creates the interviews, which on its part justifies calling reconstructed interviews stories. (Ehn 1992, 201-205.)

On the basis of the interviews it is useless to try to aim at an unambiguous and consistent subjective truth. In different situations, times and perspectives, the same thing can get different, even conflicting analyses. Also the researcher on her part constructs truths in the interviews. Also psychic defense mechanisms have an effect: overly distressing things are excluded from consciousness, or they are discussed in a roundabout manner, by using symbolic terms (Honkasalo 1988, 135-139). Even without noticing it, the researcher can influence the interview process and its emphases. Quite unconsciously, she can prevent the processing of certain aspects and events central to the lives of the interviewees. By clumsy and un insightful associations she can distance the interviewee from important things that the interviewee has been shyly approaching. The researcher's questions can also arise from a wholly different reality, which may prevent them from even touching the interviewee's world (e.g. Granfelt 1992, 23-24; Aro 1996, 136-139).

The interviews can contain a considerable amount of mutual interactions even when the researcher verbally tells next to nothing about herself. Also nonverbal communication and emotions arising in the situations are interaction. Even unintentionally, people constantly communicate – merely by existing one speaks (Moilanen 1986, 37). The interviewee's main task is to create conditions for concentrating on reflective narration. This enables identification of connections between different things as well as the spontaneous progress of the interview.

I have tried to be fully present in and concentrated on the interviews, to listen attentively and to express my interest. I have not regarded it as important to express my own views or to tell about my own life. Though the women did not ask too many questions from me, the situations seemed interactive. After all, there are other ways than merely asking to get to know another person, e.g. making observations, the atmosphere, and the jointly constructed story.

## Ethical questions and methodological traps

The homes of people living in institutions or dormitories are in public space. Therefore it is important to keep in mind that a dormitory room is meant for privacy as much as a room in a privately-owned house. Though dormitory doors do not contain locks, the researcher should respect the symbolic lock: a permission has to be obtained for opening that door. One should not force the interviewee to tell anything; one should not be too inquisitive, rather one should respect the interviewee's will. The researcher should recognise the interviewee's way of telling and choice of the stories that they prefer, and try to accommodate the research interests to these aspects.

Instead, it is ethically legitimate to carry out research that requires contacting people and personal interaction: the experience of homelessness can be told only by those who have experienced this fate. Women belonging to small marginal groups enrich women studies with their stories, which also have sociopolitical relevance. Marginalised women are still too invisible in Finnish women studies as well as in poverty studies.

Ethical questions are emotional, and there are no mechanical solutions to them (Aro 1996, 57). Antti Karisto (1994, 230), in his article on the thinking of Zygmunt Bauman, analyses insecurity and ambivalence as central conditions in life. One has to tolerate and cope with them, and this can strengthen one's ethical sensitivity. If the researcher does not assume the role of the 'good person', she may be in a position to carry out more honest research.

Ethical questions have to be solved in every single case of interaction (Bauman 1993, 78-81; also Karisto 1996, 255). What may be ethically motivated with one interviewee may be unethical with another. To some



people one can unhesitatingly pose highly personal questions, while others must be approached with due care and patience. Though I believe that being too curious and 'pushy' is particularly distasteful and unethical, there is also another trap involved: an overly sensitive and prudent researcher may not be able to help the interviewees in telling their stories; she may not be sufficiently inspiring or encouraging. In the worst case the interviewee becomes like this researcher: she expresses herself in a roundabout and 'correct' manner in order not to shock the sensitive researcher!

When talking about interviews, I use the term 'story' because I see them as attempts to reconstruct experienced life in collaboration with me. In these stories the homeless women construe their identity – they construct a description of their identity. They are the main protagonists in their stories whose identity gradually builds up in the course of their descriptions of different events, assessments of their life situations, their own interpretations and ways of narrating. The women who participated in my study mainly reminisced about their lives: they told about their lives eloquently, personally and without embellishment. Using their emotions, thinking and language, they created their own stories, sometimes shockingly sincerely:

*Riitta*: "You speak so honestly."

*Raija*: "Why polish it up."

Though sad things are in the foreground in this study, I hope that I have also been able to write about the life force that manifests itself in the women's stories. The stories in my data are not chronologically ordered biographies, complete up to the present. Still, I regard my study as a biographical study, broadly speaking: after all, what this study is about is lives and narrators. A life story is not necessarily a story that starts from childhood and progresses to adulthood. The women's stories are fragmentary, so are their lives. In the research report I have amply used my data, both as thematic fragments and as relatively long parts of stories. In this way I have tried to justify and concretise my interpretations. Secondly, with this way of writing I try to facilitate the interaction between the women and the reader. Thirdly, the purpose of the stories is to bring the experiences, thinking and words of marginalised women into contact with social work studies as well as

feminist studies.

I have analysed the data by constructing interpretations from the women's stories; interpretations whose goal is to emphasise the thematically important points. Because my approach is hermeneutic, the significance of the collection of the data is considerable. The stories are based on real people with their experiences, feelings and attitudes. My research object is the life stories of and by homeless women.

Many of the women who participated in my study asked, when the study will be completed, and they were interested in reading it. I have become personally acquainted with all the participants of the study, and on the basis of their stories they have become increasingly familiar to me in the course of the analysis. During the writing process, especially when formulating my interpretations, I have wondered, what these women would think of my text. Does my thinking correspond at all to their own interpretations of their lives? However, I have constructed the interpretations alone, without consulting the women for their opinions about my interpretations. A text can be interpreted in numerous ways, and my goal is not to give an ultimate or 'the only true' interpretation of the women's stories. In my opinion, I have formulated a psychosocially emphasised view on women's homelessness.

Some of the women have open-mindedly talked about topics that at least in my opinion are highly sensitive, e.g. about their tendency to violence or their use of alcohol during pregnancy. To my best, I try to follow the author Märta Tikkanen's definition of ethically adequate writing: "You can write about anything if you write it well". To me, writing well means respecting the narrator and her life and attempting to present the essence of her story.

The construction of the research object has taken place as an interaction between the data and the concepts. The study has become a Story built up of thematic stories. I do not study speech and text by itself; nor am I directly concerned with life itself. Rather, I study stories about women's lives from the perspective of homelessness. The stories convey an interpretation of experienced life, its narrator, and what kind of life the narrator would have wanted. They also implicitly tell about the researcher, the research process and especially about interaction.

About difficult things it is important to use words that do not cast a veil over the inconvenient reality. 'Suitable', neutral words can hide the

striving and suffering that many people have to undergo. A neutralising, made-up language indicates the pretense that “everything is fairly well, after all”. (Wendell 1996, 77-81.) Bad phenomena marked by suffering and misery stain one concept after another – and emerge as lived and experienced suffering.

With her choice of concepts, the researcher construes her object in a certain way. With belittling, tendentious concepts one can reinforce biased stereotypes and make the position of marginalised people even more difficult. It may be the case that the people studied neither can nor will identify themselves with the chosen concepts, which can tell much more about the researcher than about the people studied.

I call the women who participated in my study homeless women. I regard homelessness as a phenomenon with three dimensions: housing conditions, interrelations and the internal world. At least one of these dimensions were actual for the women during the interviews. Homelessness is a situational, not essential, property, on the basis of which a person can be classified into one or another category of out-of-the-ordinary people. What this actual category is depends on the perspective of the study. Formulating the research problem means formulating identities for the people studied.

During the research process, I have encountered three traps. One of them is becoming captive of the data: becoming enthralled by the stories, becoming fascinated by the story-tellers, idealising them. Becoming entangled in the stories makes it impossible to read the story critically, to generalise and to find the essential. At one stage, my strong efforts to avoid branding homeless women resulted in text that rendered the women as thoroughly ‘good’ people. I did not want to see or understand the distasteful and mundane aspects of their stories. This impoverished the women’s stories and made it impossible to render the women as real, individual personalities in the research text.

Another trap is explaining the data entirely on the basis of texts by other researchers. It is tempting to fully explain, know and understand, as is the role of an expert on all aspects of life (Jaatinen 1996, 242-246). Immersing in and reconsidering the data, as well as questioning spontaneous interpretations, turned out to be rather difficult to carry out. It was much more comfortable to rely on other researchers’ published texts than to expose oneself by presenting interpretations based on one’s own data and thinking.

The third trap is an emotional one. The stories of homeless women sometimes feel close to my own life, so the question arises, about who or whose reality I actually write. This emotional trap and getting out of it showed to me how tendentiously I read the women's stories at a certain stage. I then believed that I discovered and wanted to discover in those stories things that later seemed quite unrelated to the lives of the homeless women. Along with empathy, critical self-reflection and preserving a sufficient distance turned out to be extremely important.

An important result of the research process has been understanding how difficult it is to construct a picture of homelessness where social politics, human relations and the internal reality do not become disconnected dimensions, but jointly contribute to a broken and restored, fragile and homely picture.

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*Leena Eräsaari*

## SOCIAL WORK “THROUGH THE LENS”

### Foreword

This article is based on my doctoral dissertation, written in Finnish, entitled *Kohtaamisia byrokraattisilla näyttämöillä* (1995, “encounters on bureaucratic stages”), and various unpublished diaries from the field, transcribed and untranscribed recordings, my lectures on the uses of photography in the social science, perceptions of the current economic recession and its consequences etc. However, I try to focus, as the title would suggest, on what photographs and videos have taught me about the social sciences, in that it is both the community to which dissertations on social work are addressed in Finland, as well as the medium in which social work is studied or taught. However, these tools and their uses also provided me with a new insight into my field of study, social work and employment counselling. But these tools and their use also gave me a new insight to my field of study, social work and employment counselling. My description of bureaucratic spaces and artefacts, or interaction in social welfare offices and employment offices, is conveyed through text, photographs and drawings. I have tried to combine text and image in various ways; for example, I have converted the videotapes into sequential cartoon strips, sometimes also using text inserted in balloons. The photographs used in my study are mostly

anchored by text, in other words they are like pictures in a newspaper, accompanied by a text which is intended to direct the reader's mind in a certain direction.

My published research primarily includes a relatively extensive narration of the negotiations that me and my research assistant experienced in order to be granted permission to conduct the study, as well as the realisations that resulted from these negotiations. The setting was also quite an interesting case of gender problematics, since the researcher (decision-maker) was a woman while the photographer (assistant) was a man. I was a researcher and a former social worker, whereas my assistant's professional competence stemmed from his ability to efficiently utilise his instrument, although he also had extensive experience in taking humane pictures of people, especially children. The section about getting into the field deals with issues of epistemology, methodology and ethics, all of which are connected both with the researcher's actions in the field, as well as the choices she must make in translating these experiences into writing. The second part of the research deals with the social welfare office and employment office, or any other public buildings – though mainly office buildings – as bureaucratic spaces and items. In this section I used photographs to support the text. The third part describes the interaction between people in social welfare- and employment offices; in addition to the text, I try to approach the question through the use of drawings. Some of these drawings are reminiscent of cartoon strips, in which movement or a series of actions are represented by a sequence of drawings. Some of these drawings also include ballooned texts to represent some of the most common lines.

### “General”:

Many anthropologists have a habit of returning to the field, both symbolically and concretely. Sometimes they tell new stories from the field, sometimes return to the old, already published ones; sometimes they publish their journals, or compare observations made among one group of people to those made among another etc. The motives for such revisitations, both symbolic and concrete, are various. First of all, social scientists who do qualitative research, among whom I count my-



self, are, despite the comparison with anthropologists, often forced to exclude from their research texts numerous good stories, interesting points of view, as well as methodological, ethical or ideological considerations that they have in mind when writing their reports. Secondly, a changed social situation can sometimes make previously less relevant questions topical. A change in the social environment may inspire the researcher to view his or her earlier findings from a new perspective or with a different emphasis. Many topics that are relevant to the researchers themselves are former taboos which have only recently been opened to discussion, thus making a return to the former field a topical issue. Of course, the final text is also shaped by the context of the writing process, who writes and to whom. All of the motives mentioned here, and probably many others as well, are present in my text.

In qualitative social studies the researcher has basically two modes for gathering material: observation and interview. I do not attempt to deny the significance of previously existing documents, such as photographs, bureaucratic or juridical records, letters, journals etc., but rather emphasise the primary material acquired from the field. People in the field of social science have shunned the use of visual material in documentation, both as a mode of acquiring material and presenting results. The situation is quite peculiar, since taping an interview is considered an obvious practice, whereas mechanical recording of visual observations is avoided.

The lack of models and traditions in documenting and reporting visual information is both a curse and a blessing for the researcher. One problem lies in the researcher's need to evaluate the "scientificity" or orthodoxy of her work. Obviously more arguments or explanations are necessary than in traditional, i.e. speech or text-based research. The current trend within qualitative social research is towards methodological conservatism, or strictly orthodox methods. In the actual research itself, this has led to an increasing amount of explanations on methodological solutions, although at the expense of the results or the social reality. Particularly different theses, doctoral dissertations among others, are expected to exhibit a methodological pureness or brilliance, since they are considered essential in preserving the orthodoxy or pureness of the doctrine. Methodological exceptions or combined methods within one study make them hard to read, and reduce the amount

of “results” or “empiricism”.

When I was making my research I tried to describe the social reality as much as possible, as opposed to merely focusing on describing my methods and method related decisions. Thus, in my published research I provided relatively little space to the methodological ponderings upon which I based my use of pictures in the text. I will now seize the opportunity to provide an account of a few of the lessons I learnt and observations I made in visual documenting and its reportage.

There are also positive aspects to doing research without precedent, and the researcher can experience moments of joy. In the best case scenario, the lack of precedents may allow the researcher to create a new approach of her own. Anthropologists, for example, have noted that the studied subject should not be too closely related to the researcher’s own life; a certain amount of strangeness between the researcher and researched is preferred – although recent anthropological writing has started to question this view. The recent discussions on qualitative sociology have also attempted to find ways of overcoming the overfamiliarity between researcher and subject. Like many other researchers of social work or services, I am situated in “overfamiliarity”. Many have experience in both the capacities of client and employee, as well as many contacts within the different fields of social work acquired through teaching. In addition to producing professional writing, many producers and users of welfare services can constantly be seen in the newspapers and television. In other words, a social scientist doing qualitative research can never have too many aides in distancing herself from her subjects. Traditionally, the researcher has taken his or her distance to the field by thinking, considering, and reading, however, the implements of documenting can also be helpful in this. Photography, for example, continually repeats one single visual observation that takes place within the blink of an eye. Using a camera-produced document, the researcher can repeatedly recall a specific moment as it was. The ability to recall the decor of a place is definitely an asset in discussing office surroundings or organization-scapes. But people also take different attitudes towards photography and interviews, and this obviously changes the interaction between the researcher and informant, and perhaps behaviour in general as well.

Almost all of the theorising on the functions of photograph connects photography with distancing par excellence; both the event and

the outcome of documentation are considered extreme forms of objectification. Many of the discussions raised by philosophers and sociologists on images and the creation of visual data are also relevant, and are presented in this article either as visible arguments or 'between the lines'. The critique the social scientists have presented has somewhat missed the fact that photography is the most commonly used means of documenting people's lives in the 20th century; the pictures in albums, newspapers, television-documents etc. have long since surpassed the written or textual documenting of everyday life (Plummer). If the common response to photography was that the camera 'steals the soul of its object'<sup>1</sup> – instead of providing a memory or document of a moment – then how could we explain the popularity of photography?

In my research, the most important function of the camera or picture was to raise questions. This article is mainly concerned with such questions raised by research. Thus, what is being questioned is the concept of reporting in social science; why do the so-called "results" only exist in writing, and why is it that a photograph or video cannot act as a "result"? But the camera also raised questions in the people who acted as my "research material". Using the camera as a means of documentation is much more visible than simply making observations. The researcher is forced to become an "exposed" negotiator, compared with the less conspicuous role of the traditional researcher. A camera is commonly connected with tv or newspaper documentation, and therefore it obviously alters the way in which its objects present their cases. "Do I get to be a cover girl?", asked some of our interviewees in the office.

## The theme and the way to frame it: change during the research...

The original title of my study was 'Maintaining Distance in Welfare Professions'. I planned to find out the mechanisms used by professionals in the human relations and service fields in order to maintain distance from their clients. I used Georg Simmel and then Erving Goffman to shape my question; both have dealt with the subject

extensively. It is a question of the problematics connected with urbanity, or the so-called mass society. How can complete strangers cope within the same space? The question is topical in the cities, where strangers are packed densely. How do pedestrians make room for each other on crowded streets, how do they cope with one another in lifts etc.?

In social work this is not a question of crowds or crowdedness, at least not in the Nordic countries. Social workers do not work with large groups, but rather interview their clients individually; they do not deal with full lifts or crowded squares. Instead of meeting the client in the midst of a crowd, the social worker operates in a relatively small room – a cell, as I name this spatial solution used in the Nordic, and especially in the Finnish offices. The social worker or employment official and the client form a unit, which I used as a starting point for my study. When the citizen and the social worker meet, worry, sorrow, sadness and other problems are present as a third party. Thus, maintaining a professional role is necessary for the sustainment of psychological distance. The question I formed was: how do the professionals regulate the distance to the other in the small rooms they share with worried clients? However, over the course of the research process I noticed that the clients also regulate their distance from the social worker. Many male clients were concerned about being labelled as “real” clients or just generally clients. In the employment offices, for example, (male) clients rather remain in the open spaces than enter the official’s office. And when they do enter, they tend to act against advice, “forgetting” or “losing” the documents necessary for their case etc. If they find no other way to “break the rules”, men tend to attempt to get their business over and done with as quickly as possible.

I considered gender problematics from the outset, as I had come across the concept of distance in an essay by Georg Simmel (1985, 35), in which he deals with the issue from the perspective of women. Simmel claims that it is more difficult for women to keep their distance from “fellow human beings in need” than it is for men. He studied philanthropists from the turn of the century, and claimed that women who do charity work cannot turn down people in need ‘because of higher social objectives’, “um den höheren Geschellschaftlichen Zwecken”. I was mainly interested in finding out whether or not these Simmelian differences exist in the way in which male and female street-level bureaucrats confront their clients. For example, Nancy Chodorow’s (1979)

ideas about the differences in the ways in which girls and boys or women and men grow into gender would seem to support the notion of a gender-bound difference in maintaining distance. A girl grows into gender by her mother's side, whereas a boy must distance himself from the first person with whom he identifies, i.e. his mother, in order to grow into his own gender.

I have given this matter quite a lot of thought, read studies, acquired earlier experience as a social worker, and encouraged by feminist research, I have written an autobiographical text of my experiences in social work. Out of all this I formulated the hypothesis that it is essential to the female social worker or employment official to be able to maintain a certain distance vital for their survival. I also wondered whether it would be possible to recognise and observe psychological distance by studying physical distance and items. For example, could the papers filled out and scanned by the social worker represent the "materialisation" of distance? Could the different types of papers and forms, which are normally considered a tiring routine or professionally degrading necessity have a "positive" aspect as well? Is it possible that the completion of forms and papers actually provides the social worker protection from psychological strain? One could also assume that these papers provide order, since a form includes its own order with which to proceed. Forms also limit the scope of possibilities open to the social worker, not to mention the fact that they form a concrete obstacle: while filling out all those forms the social worker is unable to focus his or her eyes on the client. This, I thought, is yet another form of maintaining distance.

An integral part of the distance as well as its maintenance is the professional's gaze. Michel Foucault writes about this gaze directed straight at the client in his book, *The Birth of the Clinic* (1986), in which he also connects hospital architecture with professional practice. In addition to this, Foucault has dealt with the relationship between architecture and "prohibition-ideology" as it is presented in the practices of penal institutions. Prison architecture went through a change at the same time as the notions of crime and punishment. Before the enlightenment and the so-called new scientific medicine, it was not befitting for a doctor to direct his gaze at the patients, but rather he was to look past them. In earlier thought, the direct gaze was not included in the diagnosis of a disease and its progress. But as doctors of the new

doctrine began to observe their patients, light, and consequentially glass architecture, became an integral part of the hospital. The importance of windows in hospitals was later emphasised by a changed notion of hygiene, as well as by the new ideas of a visible and transparent governance. From medicine and hospital architecture as well as prison architecture, the idea of the professional's gaze and the necessary architecture was also conveyed to other professional relationships, social work among them. I was hopeful that the use of videotaping would enable me to document the core of the professional relationship, eye contact.

These considerations on the subject of distance first inspired me to begin collecting material on video. I thought that the physical distance, forms and papers, or the eye contact or a lack of it would be easily documented by video. I must add that I did not trust my abilities to observe such processes; as a researcher I was a relatively inexperienced observer, and the chains of events which I intended to study would have required an experienced one, as I understood it.

Based on my observations and interviews I managed to prove Simmel's claim of the gender-bound differences correct, but at the end of the day I was forced to reformulate my results. I use the words "female officials serve their clients better than men". What I mean by this is that, for example, female social workers interviewed their clients for longer periods of time, and also made more outside contacts than their male colleagues; they "do concrete things for their clients". In contrast, male social workers and employment officials impel their clients to make outside contacts themselves. However, I assume that the male clients do not share my views of "better service". At least some of them viewed the female officials as "over prying". Viewed from the role of a male client, it can be considered problematic that the hierarchically higher official is a woman.

When I described my question to the social workers and employment officials using the concept of "distance", the male professionals liked the topic. They told me that they feel that the professional ideologies overemphasise its opposite, closeness, "care". The male professionals would have preferred an amount of distance, at least a greater amount than that accepted by the professional ideologies or dominantly female collegial communities. The male professionals felt they were being pressured, and in a way "allied" themselves with me and the

questions I asked. The female professionals, on the other hand, felt distressed by "distance". For the female social workers the term "closeness" would have been a preferred choice.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, one of my most important findings in the context of distance and gender problematics was that the female social workers did not want to conceptualise the encounters with their clients in terms of regulating distance, but rather in terms of closeness. My unsuccessful choice of words, distance as opposed to closeness or even "interval" or "length", resulted in the female social workers feeling uncomfortable about the entire framing of my questions, despite the fact that they comprised my most significant source of reference.

Thus, my research did not answer the question I had set out to study: do the social workers' modes of maintaining distance vary according to gender? Not at least as I had expected. However, the concept of distance proved its usefulness for my research in many other ways. First of all, it was precisely the idea of choosing the maintenance of distance as my primary object of study that inspired me to videotape the interviews by social workers and employment counsellors. After the initial explanations and research plans I hired a photographer, rented a video camera. We then got permission from the offices, and went through negotiations with the social workers and employment counsellors themselves. However, in the end the technology did not live up to my expectations.

First of all, it was impossible to record eye contact between the social or employment worker and client, as doing so would have required at least two cameras: one pointed at the official's face and the other at the client's face. And two cameras in those small rooms would have made them cramped indeed. A camera looking straight into one's face would also have felt an ethically unbearable solution. In addition it also would have changed the focus of the gaze, increasing the amount of "undirectional" gaze at the expense of "interactive" looking. And besides the camera, there was the cameraman in the room as well. If there had been two cameras, he would have been forced to move from one to the other, thus disrupting the actual interview even further. Choosing a video camera as the instrument of documentation had a significant effect on my selection of "material", but having two of them pointed at people's faces would undoubtedly have had an even greater one.

While I was collecting the material I became convinced that the video camera should not stare straight at the client, nor should there be any overly “intimate” close-ups. I thought it more proper that the clients should not be recognisable by their faces. This “modesty” was also aimed at protecting the clients’ privacy, since their discussions with the officials were private. It was definitely not my aim to bring private or intimate information out into the open, but when the clients’ faces are shown on the screen, they become easily recognisable. I did not plan to include the clients’ faces in my report, but at the fieldwork stage I was still quite unsure of what I was actually going to report, and how to convert that information into something scholarly.

For lack of a better term, I have labelled my images and interview material simply as “information. There simply are very few good terms to choose from. “Object” or “material” are poor names for representing the people in my study, but the terms “client” and “citizen”, which I have used in my reported research, are both biased. “Citizen” refers to the state and politics, possibly even nationalism. The term “client” assumes a relationship between the studied bureaus or officials and the people who visited them, even though many of the people we encountered in these offices did not want to be labelled as “clients”. I have also used the idea of “role”, which suits the metaphor of “stage” I have used in my research. The stage is a metaphor of place used in urban research. I did not choose it because of its popularity, but because Erving Goffman has used it on several occasions, and many of my ideas are based on those of Goffman. I also consider role an excellent term, because we only documented people in public situations, in corridors, waiting rooms, and various other places in which other people either could be or were present. The use of the term role is, however, problematic for the people used as material in my research, since it is only the researcher’s interpretation; they became role players only during the writing and illustration processes of my research. Out in the field I interviewed, observed, and got photographs of various people in two separate office buildings. In other words, I document people who visit the social welfare and employment offices, but I also depict these offices as a stage or setting on or in which action takes place.



## Papers as reflections of gender

The academy funding for my research also included funds for a photographer, so I hired a professional one. The University of Jyväskylä had a photographer, who was employed under the title of "laboratory technician", whose work I was previously familiar with. He was always present when something "festive" took place, at the opening and closing of the term, at conferments of degrees, at Ph.D. thesis examinations, as well as at lectures or in conferences. In the late 70's and early 80's there was a small yet prominent group of photographers in Jyväskylä, of which my future assistant was an active member. I had seen his work in the group's magazine (*Fotogenesis*) and in exhibitions, in which I had come to know him as someone who documented people; his photographs of children particularly impressed me. I believe that Matti Salmi would not reject the labels "documentarian", "humane documentarian" or perhaps "social documentarian".

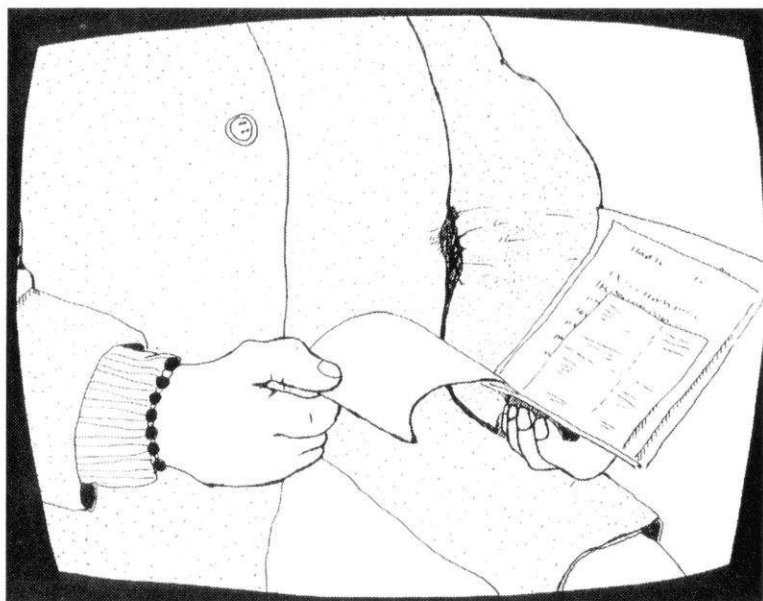
For two months Matti photographed the offices in Jyväskylä, after which he spent two months videotaping both the employment office and social welfare office respectively. For the "first round", I drew a list of things in the offices that I wanted Matti to photograph: the facade, the front door, the reception area; high, low; large small. My list was based on an article by Raimondo Strassoldo (1993), which introduces a number of spatial categories used by sociologists. The photographer took this list to the Inland Revenue, the police station, the health centre, the psychiatric clinic, city hall, the employment office, and social welfare office. He made this round by himself. He made contact sheets of the pictures he had taken, and I chose the ones I wanted him to print. Of these first photographs, only a relatively small amount ended up making it to the further stages; the ones that made it to the final stage can all be considered "handicraft". Thus, the background material has been sorted and re-sorted several times. The majority of photographs that finally appeared in the book were "hand-printed" by the photographer himself.

Since the photographer made these visits by himself, he began keeping a diary and making field notes of his visits to the various offices. I gave my consent to this "hobby", although initially I was quite unaware of the value of such notes. Only after the third or fourth time he brought me his markings did I begin to warm up to them. In the end I

was so enthusiastic about these notes that I added them to the beginning of my research, specifically the parts in which he discusses the acquisition of permission to document the various offices. When my assistant requested permission to photograph the different offices, he was required to present a research plan in writing. Before we were granted access to study these street-level bureaucracies, we had to present our case on paper. I included in the final text the paper which gained us access. Only after we had collected “all of the material” and I began to ponder the nature of the research I would make out of it, did I realise just how remarkable all of these negotiations actually were. We had gone through several conversations in order to get our permits, and these conversations seemed to “reveal” a general character or “spirit” of the studied organisations. Helen Schwarzman (1993) has made similar observations on negotiating with organisations about the permission to do research.

This demand to present our business on paper opened my eyes to what I in my research called the “ritualistic significance of usage of papers” in bureaucratic interaction. However, the outcome of the documentation, the visual representation, was also prone towards prodding the “results” in this direction. It was quite easy to count the number of papers exchanged on the videotapes. Clients are expected to bring an amount of documents with them in order to prove that their circumstances are “prevalent”. On the other hand, the clients also receive a number of documents to take with them: brochures on social security and the norm budget. The papers handed and received by the clients also proved to reflect their gender quite accurately.

I labelled the men’s relationship to the papers they (were supposed to) bring along as the collected explanations of why they did not. Women do bring these papers along; some of them consider them a homework assignment of sorts, which they are to complete before coming to the office. They count their norm budget in advance, put the papers in the right order for the norm budget, and hand them to their social worker in the right order. Men, for their part, go to great lengths in order to avoid bringing the papers with them. I interpreted this lack of papers as well as all of the other “dodging” as an unwillingness to be labelled as clients or otherwise problematic – which often means the same thing in social work. The less “clientish” acts the men perform, the easier it is for them to maintain their dignity. The “role” of the



client consists of many actions, which the men seek to avoid, often even actively resist. One of the acts that can be seen as promoting "clientness" is the completion of the registration form. In order to be registered at the social welfare or employment offices the clients are required to fill out a form, which in turn represents their willingness to become clients of the office. If they refuse this, it represents the opposite, and they are denied the benefits of these offices. Clienthood is also expressed by entering the social worker's office, bringing the required papers and making contact with other officials. The male clients seem to be opposed to all of these actions, which they express either verbally or by some other means. Some of the male social work clients also seemed to assume that receiving the benefits as quickly as possible denoted skilful or proper clienthood. Receiving the documents, the papers about social welfare and the norm budget from the social worker is also a part of the clienthood of social work; these papers were only offered to female clients. The question of distance, both symbolic and concrete, was not relevant only to the male professionals. The male clients also used different means of maintaining their distance from the professionals and of acting out the required roles.

## The video and the empowerment of clients

The photographer often asked me to explain what it was that we were doing. I did this to the best of my ability by having him read the plans and articles, and of course by narrating. However, I had also hoped that he would act as the “layman” who would open my eyes to the things I was too close to see. The paper which gained us our access was a good example of the way in which my assistant’s “innocence” questioned the ordinary. Most of the research made on bureaucracy, even that which focuses on interaction, ignores the papers, considering them a background noise of sorts. In my study the “running of papers” became an essential part of bureaucratic interaction. A second eye-opener took place in the field while we were recording in the social welfare office. Of course, my ponderings after the recordings have shaped my view on the importance of the video’s presence in the office. Like other field researchers, I have written and told of the event for several times, that is, how the video camera combined with my assistant came to act as an implement of empowerment for the clients of social work. In a sense the relationship between the clients and the use of the video camera was the most significant “result” of the recordings: of course, I realise that such evaluation is difficult and uncomfortable, I merely wish to emphasise the importance of this observation. I will further illustrate the matter.

Some of the clients perceived the camera, video recorder, and their user as representative of the television or newspapers. There are both television and radio shows which citizens can contact in order to gain publicity for their causes. The majority of the cases discussed on these programmes deal with “unjust” treatment at the hands of the authorities. These programmes include, for example, *Kansan radio* (“the people’s radio”) and television programmes hosted by Hannu Karpo. Even though my assistant informed the people that he was documenting them merely for a research project, it did not stop them from viewing it as a wider form of publicity. In the social welfare office, people turned up just to tell the video their cases or biographies. These clients did not even have an appointment with a social worker, nor did they seek to consult one. They all had a so-called long history as clients of social work, and their biographies were also very dramatic. For example, there was a man whose wife had died in an car accident that he had caused

by driving while he was drunk. The man was sent to prison, his children were taken into custody, and his entire savings had gone to childcare payments and ridding himself of the stigma attached to a prison sentence. This in turn resulted in a series of poorly paid jobs etc. The man felt he had been mistreated, possibly even illegally, by the social workers and the office. He had tried to seek justice by filing complaints to various authorities, although all of his efforts were in vain. Therefore, one interpretation of his speech for the video could be that he attempted to use both this research tool and the researcher as yet another forum in which to lodge a complaint, perhaps viewing it as a higher court to which he could appeal. Similarly, some other clients also tried to use the research scenario as an opportunity for justice, as a higher court. They saw the video as a new possibility for making both an appeal and a positive stand for their cause.

The clients' narrations were autobiographies also in a "more traditional" sense, the motives for telling the stories varied. Telling about one's own life, reminiscing, is both enjoyable and educating. The clients in social welfare offices develop their own unique ways of telling their life stories. Such narration is dominated by hardship and struggle, but also by the narrator's expectations of the content and mode of narration that the social worker wants to hear. When the clients told their stories to the cameraman and the video camera, they were able to use the modes of narration that they would normally use in the social welfare office. But they were also able to express themselves differently than in the social worker's interview. Thus, as autobiographies, the clients' stories were both repetitions of previous narrations and ruptures leading into something new.

The clients probably gave us a longer version of their biographies than the "normal" one during the social worker's interview. They also presented extensive interpretations without interruptions, objections, or examinations from the interviewer. The clients usually also seemed willing to explain the "root cause" of their troubles, which in many cases was hidden behind many years, layers, and twists and turns in the plots of their lives. It would be impossible, possibly even futile or harmful, for such long and thorough biographical details to emerge in the routine interviews conducted by the social workers. In all likelihood the social workers have heard their long-time clients' life stories several times, and have become immune to them or routinized as listeners. A

new listener or receiver of a biography may inspire a new kind of dialogical relationship, a new beginning for another view or interpretation. Thus, we could be dealing with the wish for a new (or real) autobiography in the sense that Hannah Arendt (Guaraldo 1997) speaks of the interactive nature of autobiography. A “real” autobiography requires a listener; where no listener is present, there can be no autobiography, the conditions of human existence are not fulfilled. But the autobiography characterised by Arendt has even stricter requirements: the listener or reader must narrate the biography s/he has heard in order for it to become an autobiography in the strictest sense. In this interpretation, the clients’ willingness to present their biographies to the cameraman could be seen as an emancipatory interest: the clients tell their autobiographies on tape in order to get their stories recorded and retold to someone else, and eventually returned to them. Thus, in Arendt’s view there is a basic human need to be heard, to tell “what I am like”. The listener confirms that s/he has heard, understood and become “touched” by retelling the story to others and back to the original narrator of the biography. Thus, a person’s autobiography is shaped in a dialogical relationship with other people. It is characteristic to a “real” autobiography is that it changes each time it is retold. Of course, the client also has more practical aims with regard to the video, namely, the wish to promote and publicise his or her own case in order to create change. But basically we are dealing with one and the same thing; human existence consists of large and small motives which exist side by side.

We only began recording those clients who actively told their stories in front of the camera at a later stage in our fieldwork. My assistant and I were only barely able to save our faces, but managed to use our time doing what we had originally set out to do. Since then I have often wondered what would have happened had we continued for yet another month. It almost felt as if the amount of clients who wanted to be videotaped was growing into a movement of sorts. What then would have happened to the research? Would the clients’ activeness or radicalisation have destroyed the research project? How was it possible that a single tool, in this case a camera, could successfully accomplish something that so many people have attempted in vain? After all, there have been several research projects which have attempted to include the object in the creation of research or genuine dialogue. Lars

Johansson, a Swedish scholar in development studies, also has analogical experience in the use of videotaping. He has used videotaping in several "documentation and participation studies" in Tanzania, and has come to the same conclusions as I have. People who feel they have been mistreated are willing to talk about their cases, and are not afraid of the publicity. It may even be, that such individuals are trying to find new ways to tell about themselves and their cases. In the Tanzanian example, videotaping also had inherent political and juridical consequences. For example, a video of fishing women was shown to the politicians in the capital, which led the parliament to change the laws in a direction more favourable to women's fishing. This in turn caused the fishermen to create a video that would support their own cause. Lars Johansson has been using the video with the Tanzanian fisher folk and other coast-dwellers more systematically and for a longer time than I, so obviously the "results" have been much more impressive, both as videos and as their political implications. So I would like to emphasise it just one more time, that if a research is aimed at change, or participation or dialogue with the researched, then videotaping is a very good option.

The willingness to be documented expressed by the clients of the social welfare office, as well as their activeness in the event of recording itself, were a part of the reason my assistant and I came into conflict with the social workers. After the field stage we sat down with the social workers to evaluate our accomplishments in the social welfare office, and some of their comments were quite bitter. Some of them even stated that they would have withdrawn from participation had it been possible. Quoting one of the social workers present at the meeting, I have referred to it as the "flaying session". The social workers were quite disappointed in us in many ways, my assistant for example had been "too nice to the clients", whereas I had not been "supervising him well enough". And when in addition to this I gave in my published research a relatively extensive account of the autobiographists we had recorded, as well as a description of the aforementioned meeting and several other events in the social welfare office, the social workers were not too enthusiastic about my work. All of the direct comments I have received from any social worker about my work have ranged from critical to hostile. The critique has mainly dealt with the "hassle" caused by the camera, or with the question of "image", as the use of

videotaping effectively selected my example individuals from a more versatile group of clients and their cases. By this I refer to the fact that the cases we videotaped emphasise matters of subsistence, whereas the more “sensitive” cases, such as childcare, are altogether absent.

## Found earlier research!

A common habit among scholars is to begin describing their research as one of a kind: “since no-one has done this before, this is exactly what this research is about”. Such openings are the legitimisation of a researcher’s work, it would be hard to imagine that even in these postmodern times anyone would begin their research plans or opening paragraphs by emphasising the amount of similar material within the same field of study – perhaps even written from the same viewpoints or with similar methods. Of course, this is also a question of the researcher’s initial lack of knowledge regarding the previous studies on the intended topic or question. At the point when I was still in the process of sketching my research plans, I was certain that I would be just about the world’s first researcher of social policy or social work to use and produce moving and still images. The lack of models also caused me to doubt and question my work as soon as something went wrong. For example, the aforementioned conflict with the social workers caused me to question my choice of tools. I also spent a lot of time thinking about the best way to present the visual results. But it later turned out that I in fact had not pioneered the production of visual data in social-political or social work research. For example, there was a well-known period in the United States during which sociologists, social workers and political reform movements joined forces with photographers.

The critical discussion and social movements in the United States during the first part of the century aimed at speaking on behalf of the country’s poor. Photographers also were involved in this movement, and have later been labelled as representatives of critical social documentarianism (*How the other half lived*). Many of the photographers seen as a part of this circle are quite well-known, however, Jacob A. Riis and Lewis W. Hine are particularly famous. Both of them, for example, combined words and pictures to present the poor living and working



conditions of both emigrants and blacks working on farms, the use of child labour, etc. Both also joined social movements which tried to improve the conditions of the American poor. They wrote and took pictures for charity organisations, and participated in the drawing up and documentation of several government reports dealing, for example, with the living conditions of emigrants or the use of child labour. Both these and many other photographers worked with President Roosevelt in accomplishing social reforms that would improve the conditions of the poor. Photography was used for enfurthering various social reforms and documenting the poor living conditions in the cities of Europe as well, at least in England (John Tagg 1988).

Thus, the newspapermen, both the ones with a camera or with a pen, got involved in politics and reform movements at a time when social scientists were for their part actively seeking partnership with photographers. This resulted in a large amount of reports ordered by the government, which in addition to text included photographs of smallholders, living conditions of the emigrants, city slums etc. Round the turn of the century, the *American Journal of Sociology* also published a multitude of articles which used text supported by photography. Often these photographs were attached to texts of sociology, social work, and/or reformism. They included articles which could easily be labelled as "qualitative sociology". If the interest to know or motive for research covered the whole spectre of possibilities, so did the quality of the outcome (Clarence Stasz, 1979).

After the First World War, photographs disappeared from American sociology during Albion Small's second term as the editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*. However, photographers were not the only ones done away with during his reign: both "well-meaning reformers" and women also disappeared from the journal's list of contributors. They were replaced by sociology department staff, and the most prevalently used sociological methods were quantitative. The amount of qualitative sociology and/or ethnological emphasis diminished for decades, maybe even half a century. Albion Small's influence also reached the so-called Chicago school of sociology. The Chicago sociology department was characterised by its aims to develop the so-called qualitative research. Thus it followed that Small for example transferred the women working in the Chicago department to the department of social work, and in order to get rid of the "well-meaning

dreamers”, he severed the department’s ties to the Hull House settlement centre and its founder, Jane Addams (Mary Jo Deegan). Clarice Stasz explains the disappearance of the photographs as resulting from a lack of funds; printing is more expensive with pictures than without. But Stasz also thinks that Small wanted to “scientificise” sociology to resemble empirical laboratory sciences such as chemistry or physics. The “poor eyes in the photograph looking back at the reader” did not suit his idea of laboratory scientific results.

Stasz also emphasises photography’s ability to provide background information on what was described textually; pictures, or the combination of words and pictures, speak more than a thousand words. Photographs could easily convey a more “radical” view than words alone. They had the potential to reveal things that one dared not deal with in words. In other words, the messages that these photographs conveyed might easily have been “too much” in a situation in which a discipline pursued “legitimation” as an objective science, as opposed to being viewed as a tool for making the world a better place. Perhaps Aibion Small made the same discovery as I did when making my research. Namely, that photographs, both the outcome and the act of photography, possess the potential to act as implements of empowerment, or as some kind of catalyst or radicalisation.

## On organisations and particular ethnic features of the Finns

Even before I received funding for my project, I had my students engage in small-scale studies with both video and ordinary cameras as part of their proseminars and similar small groups. Therefore I already had some idea of the kinds of pictures that, for example, museums and private individuals could offer of various bureaus. With my students I had already made the same discovery that can be read in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) research: Photographs of work are seldom found in the ordinary people’s photo albums. Thus, one can hardly find images of office life from its workers, except for photographs of special occasions promoting staff integration, such as festivities, open days, strikes, or training situations. In other words, the photographic

documentation of different bureaus, also university life, has not been comprehensive. Since I had the opportunity to hire a photographer, I thought I could use some of his input in documenting these bureaus.

Often times, as soon as my research assistant had managed to negotiate permission to take photographs in a given office, he was taken on a tour of the premises by a higher official of the organisation. One reason for this was no doubt that photography as a part of research was considered strange, i.e. something they had no routine for. But it was also an attempt to ensure that the research would convey an image of the bureaucracy in which things are done properly. In other words, the idea was to avoid conveying an image of bureaucracy in which a photographer can just walk in and take pictures of confidential files. I came to think about such "image-bound" tours after my photographer had left his role of researcher, and was allowed to move around the police offices much more freely in his capacity as a newspaper photographer. As a research photographer he was denied access to certain places which were open to the newspaper photographer, such as the room in which the cells were monitored by video. Other newspaper photographers have also reported similar experiences: access to public bureaus is relatively unrestricted. Of course, the office overseers' willingness to present their own bureaus to the photographer included other motives as well – to advertise or praise it: "this is how well we are doing". A comparison with other Nordic organisations taught me a new thing about social planning: in Finnish offices and workplaces we are always "in the best there is", problems are swept under the carpet when someone comes for a visit.<sup>3</sup> This grand side is what was shown to my photographer, "the best one there is". Perhaps the bosses were not convinced their underlings would be as loyal to the house as they were.

My photographer and I tried to avoid "architecture", i.e. photographs with no people in them. Sometimes we were forced to almost stage the scenes with people in them; we also used ourselves as mannequin clients. We had to use our persuasive skills to get the people into the photographs. The clients discussed earlier were exceptions to this rule. Another exceptional group were the people who had just "begun their training", emigrants from other countries and cultures. No doubt, there are many reasons for their eagerness to be recorded, however I believe that an important one is the fact that the employment and social wel-



fare offices do not carry the same kind of stigmas of shame and social discrimination as they do for other Finns. Judging by the pictures, it looked as if these emigrants were almost proud of beginning their training, and, for example, they came to the employment office all dressed up. Having their pictures taken by a photographer who just conveniently happened to be present further increased the “festive air”. The others for their part refused to be photographed because they were not dressed well enough, or because they did not want to be labelled as clients of the employment or social welfare office. Many refused to be photographed altogether, or gave their consent but told us they did it unwillingly. Several of the clients and employees told us that they generally do not enjoy being photographed. Therefore, I concluded that the entire photographic project also revealed an ethnic trait of the Finnish. Finns are characterised by “shyness” and a type of modesty: imagining yourself as “something” or “somebody” is not acceptable in Finnish culture. People who want to be photographed show that they consider themselves worth it, “think highly of themselves”.

Some of the refusals we got, also with regard to the videotaping, are connected with this motive of shyness or timidity. The above mentioned conflict between research and social work is partly connected with this as well. Since the social workers were generally reluctant to be recorded, they also grew tired sooner than if they had considered it a pleasant activity. The clients did not refuse as often as the employees, but we had more refusals in the social welfare office than in the employment office. Women refused more often than men. The video also affected the selection of clients we recorded. In the social welfare office, for example, both the "most difficult" clients and their social workers refused to be recorded. The image of social work conveyed by my work deals with the so-called "routine cases", taking care of the bare subsistence. Therefore, the social workers have expressed disappointment with the content of my research, in that it leaves the harder and more challenging aspects of their work undocumented.<sup>3</sup> Professional social workers learn most of their future profession by reading books on social work in English. In these English books, social work is almost synonymous with childcare, whereas providing for the clients' subsistence, the norm budget and processing it, is barely mentioned as a part of "social work". Such literary and textual valuations adopted during one's studies resurface when the social worker tries to provide as positive an image as possible of the work s/he does. Of course, one particularly strives to impress the former seat of learning or its representatives, the studies. Thus, by the time I was drawing near the end of my research, the social workers were increasingly distressed by the "one-sided" or overly simplified image I conveyed of their work.

## After the economic recession and cuts in social security

When I was collecting various data for my research, Finland was in the middle of an economic boom. This changed by the end of 1990 while I was working in the field with my assistant. Now, as 1998 turns to 1999, the recession still continues. The Finnish social security system has undergone several cuts, and perhaps the greatest amount has been taken from those who were then, and still are most dependent upon it.

The diminishing social security benefits, such as lower quality and higher expenses in health care, home help and schools, affect the people who are worst off, rather than those in higher positions. Local authorities and other providers of public services have reduced their budgets, making it impossible for social welfare offices to employ new workers, and in many cases even forcing them to lay off social workers and other civil servants at local governmental levels (social welfare in Finland is run mainly by local authorities). Compared to the time during which I made my research, today clients are being forced to wait for longer periods in order to see a social worker. At the same time drugs, for example, have become a more serious problem in Finland. For these and other reasons, the social welfare offices have become much more crowded and restless places than they were during the time in which I made my study.<sup>4</sup>

These offices have tried to solve the problem, for example, by means of increased control: doors are kept closed, often locked; private security guards are hired to maintain order. The offices are now also controlled by surveillance cameras etc; Finland has no legislation to restrict the use of video surveillance. Therefore for example many clothes stores use video cameras in their fitting-rooms, there are even public lavatories which use video surveillance. It is freely used in the universities, schools, streets and marketplaces, railway stations, undergrounds etc.

While researchers, I among them, consider not only the scientificity of video usage, but also its ethics, morality and justness, the use of the video camera as an implement of another kind of control and governance goes unquestioned. I am not trying to deny the fact that almost any kind of social study can be converted into knowledge used for controlling people, but we can still keep in mind the difference in people's motives for documenting. The motive for my research was to find out and understand how social workers do their work, and how the clients either accept or refuse the role they are being offered. I also try to provide a kind of a "mirror" for the clients and employees, as well as for the research community and other citizens to use: this is how we are, how we act in different bureaus, how the bureaus and public buildings are. My aim, in other words, was to help people understand their own behaviour, their roles, and "growing into citizenship or Finnishness" in fulfilling these roles. By these roles I mean, for example, the citizen who is seeking information from a particular office, the unem-

ployed person seeking employment, a random visitor in the social welfare office, as well as its long-term clients.

It is more than peculiar that the social sciences are not interested in the use of video and photography, while both are being used in various ways for both gathering and processing information by the mass media, television and press. They are also used in the documenting of ordinary people's everyday lives in photo albums and home videos. In addition to the kind of surveillance I have mentioned above, photography has also been used as a means of control and surveillance ever since its emergence, for example in the police and prison registers. Various identification cards and passports have used the photograph for control via recognition (Tagg). The newcomer in this category is the surveillance of the foetus by ultrasound. This visual representation is said to alter our relationship both to the mother and child (Eräsaari 1998).

My final comments, which combine my visual recordings with a wider social context, are aimed to prepare for my conclusions. If the social sciences, in their zeal to maintain methodological and/or doctrinal purity, have ignored an important tool for collecting and processing social data, then it is no longer certain whether their doctrine is one worth following. Thus, I would like to encourage the research of social work towards interdisciplinarity and variety. Such variety should consist of different materials and methods, as well as different modes of reporting for research. Such variety would prefer conclusions or results to orthodoxy or "scientificity".

## Notes

- 1 Visual anthropology, or at least anecdotes on anthropologists recording visual data, tell stories of various primitive peoples (aboriginals) who are afraid of the camera, because it might steal their souls.
- 2 Personally I disagree: I consider dealing with the "routine cases" hard work as well.
- 3 More recently, I have learnt in the university that Finnish research and sciences are also "the best ones there are".
- 4 The newspaper Helsingin Sanomat reported on 6.3.1999 (A7) a study on social work. (Yli puolet sosiaaliväestä haluaisi vaihtaa ammattia.) The study was done by professor Niemelä, and its results reveal that more than every second social worker would like to change their occupation if possible.

This is because of the burn-out and stress in social work today. The amount of clients is approximately double what it was prior to the recession, and the clients' problems are more severe than before.

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*Maritta Törrönen*

## REFLEXIVE ETHNOGRAPHY – WHEN CHILD AND RESEARCHER MEET

”...reflexivity may play a more significant part these days than in the past in shaping how individuals place themselves and therefore how they act.” (Williams & Popay 1999, 169)

This article will examine what transpires when a researcher and child meet, by drawing upon ethnomethodologic and ethnographic research and, in particular, participant observation. It aims at analysing the significance of reflexivity in the study of children and their everyday lives, as well as its potential in social work research. I shall be examining reflexivity as it is manifested in the participation, responsibility and respect between the researcher and the children encountered.

My examples will be drawn from my own experiences during the fieldwork studies for my doctoral dissertation and the manuscript reporting them (Törrönen 1998). I have analysed the way in which children organise their everyday lives in a hospital and children’s home, as opposed to merely focusing on the contents of their daily lives there (cf. Mayall 1996, 98). In doing so I have attempted to determine how the social order is maintained and constructed in the institutions studied.

Becoming immersed in the field is often a longer and more active process than one might assume. It is also a process that takes some

unexpected turns (Ely et al. 1993, 50), as I was to discover. I already knew from experience that fieldwork and research are taxing both on the researcher and the people studied. I never expected the research process to be easy, however I was quite surprised to discover how exhausting the negotiations, permission applications and meetings with numerous people could be.

In this case the field does not consist of a set, existing unit, but rather is created as the research proceeds, and is collectively moulded by the researcher's practical measures, the consulted literature and the notes taken. The field is also shaped by what the researcher writes and by the way in which the reader interprets and contextualises it. (Atkinson 1992, 5-9.)

## Focus on everyday life and on children as subjects

In my research I have chosen to focus on the everyday lives of children and the ways in which they organise their everyday activities, applying ethnomethodological interpretation to my examination. The children's activities are what concern me, and I have taken the research situations to be interpretive and contextual states of interaction. Ethnomethodology refers to the study of everyday knowledge and of the procedures and cognitive patterns by which members of society understand their living conditions, operate within them and influence them (Heritage 1996, 18; Garfinkel 1967, 11).

In ethnomethodological research human beings are understood as research subjects, and the main interest lies in their everyday lives. According to Anssi Peräkylä (1990, 146), ethnomethodology does not attempt to explore how people experience the world. Rather, in producing social reality, the ethnomethodological approach focuses on the analysis of everyday life activities and on how social order and consensus is reached (Peräkylä 1990, 146).

Ethnomethodologically orientated researchers stress the interpreted and constructed nature of social reality, and the attempt to produce social reality ties ethnomethodology to the tradition of social constructionism. Social reality is thus understood to be organised by

subjective meaning. The speech and action of examinees is then interpreted as being associated with a certain place and time (Giddens 1979, 3). Anthony Giddens (1977, 33-43, 155-162) has systematically attempted to unite ethnomethodological thinking with the social sciences. He views social reality not only as a construction of speech, but, contrarily, as a combination of social action, speech and structure. As such, I consider the written text to be an interpretation of the children's action and space, not as a realistic description of circumstances (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 11).

The children's home and hospital are part of the public social services system, designed to maintain the nation's welfare. Social workers make decisions about these children, and a study of the children's everyday lives reveals their consequences. This kind of study provides a different perspective of the children's life domain than would be obtained from an examination of children as clients in the social service system. As opposed to focusing on problems and difficulties, I concentrate on the ordinary aspects of the everyday lives of children that often go unnoticed.

Children suffering from maltreatment and sickness arouse the sympathy of others. Even today, people still have strong views both on how children should be raised and looked after, and on the provision of social welfare and health services. The problems faced by children, and adults' concern for their children's futures are prominent topics of public debate.

Deprivation and difficulties stress only one side of the life of the child (see Goldstein 1997, 22-23). It is impossible to make an objective study of life situations and choices, and therefore the choice always must be one of approach in attempting to describe people's lives. Any description will always be selective in relation to the state of examination (Heritage 1996, 151).

Research into social policy and social work has described the difficult life situations of families ill-being, and the insecurity of children's living conditions. Meanwhile, in a study of street children, Bar-On (1997) observed that the children had been able to acquire strength and initiative, traits that are usually valued in children. He thus dispels the uniform, negative image of street children. Bar-On observes that street children are not a homogeneous group. In their life on the streets, the children are able to learn to do various jobs as assistants, and develop

the skills required in working life. In addition, the children he observed did not all sleep in the streets; some stayed with relatives, for example, and only spent part of their time in the streets. Goldstein (1997), having interviewed adults who once lived in children's homes, also refutes the myth that they result in a poor quality of life, since the people he interviewed described their lives as being generally well-organised. They also stressed that their experiences of life had taught them to be satisfied with their achievements.

The views expressed by Bar-On (1997) and Goldstein (1997) are a challenge to address social research from angles other than those of ill-being, deprivation and difficulties, and to focus on groups other than adults. They are an incentive to shatter the customary socio-political approaches. Viewing services through the eyes of the child and childhood research also has something to offer to social work research.

Finnish social policy and social work have tended to focus on the disadvantaged (Heikkilä & Vähätalo 1994; Virtanen 1995, 9). The reports reveal in plain language that child welfare continues to be targeted primarily toward at the most disadvantaged members of society. The indicators used, such as family size, living in rented housing or being a member of the working population, may either brand people or act as omens in predicting their future. These indicators include the concepts held by the modern world of the determining force of the past, whereas the postmodern approach views people as being free from the fetters of time and the past (Bauman 1996, 195).

There has been an increase in research on child welfare in Finland since the 1970s, most of which has applied quantitative methods of analysis (e.g. Sipilä 1979). This research has addressed the regional and quantitative differences between child welfare and ill-being or deprivation among children, and has analysed the implementation and objectives of administrative procedures. Qualitative research has been gaining ground alongside quantitative research in the 1990s. Among the topics covered by the reports published in the 1990s are the development of child welfare by means of networking, the practices applied in defining deviation and social problems, the well-being of child welfare families both nationally and internationally, and the conditions in which children grow up (e.g. Pösö 1993).

Child welfare has become a subject of academic research, and there has been an increase in the publication of books and textbooks

surveying and assessing child welfare in Finland (e.g. Pulma & Turpeinen 1987). Service provision has been examined from the child's perspective for over a decade now (e.g. Siltanen 1987), but even so, it has failed to achieve much significance in socio-political research.

My previous research brought me into contact with child welfare, and in the process I realised that there are few statistics and little information on the lives of children once they have been placed in a children's home. I was reminded of the old Finnish films that ended with the marriage of the leading characters, after which we were shown nothing interesting about their lives. The researcher wishing to find out what happens after a child is taken into care or placed in a children's home draws a similar blank in consulting the reports or investigations on child welfare. There has been drastic intervention in the children's lives; they have been separated from their parents and sent to live elsewhere. What are their lives like from then on?

Furthermore, how do the everyday lives of children in residential homes differ from those in hospitals? Children are cared for and treated in both social welfare and health care institutions, and my interest has been to examine how these institutions differ from the children's point of view. This is the point at which I have crossed customary borders, in that I have not confined my studies to social welfare, but have also broadened my scope to include healthcare. Forsberg (1998, 66) examines two expert cultures in child welfare: the family support centre and the social welfare office, arguing that the strength of her comparative approach lies in its ability to observe phenomena that appear to be mundane, natural and self-evident more clearly than if the investigation were to only involve one target organisation. I, too, use one institution to throw the cultural features of another into projection, in the hope that this will reveal features of the everyday life of the child that might otherwise be overshadowed.

My studies tie in with the childhood research tradition seeking to discover how children act in various everyday situations, and how they are part of society in the process (see Strandell 1995, 18). According to this tradition, everyday social action and its analysis is regarded as being of scientific importance as a research topic. Social reality is not regarded as permanent, but as a constantly changing and renewing state, and human action is seen as meaningful and intentional. (Prout & James 1990, 15; also Corsaro 1997, 5, 18.)

My understanding of children's activities coincides to a great extent with those of Corsaro (1997), who uses the concept of the interpretive reproduction of childhood. This is criticism levelled at both the interpretive theories of childhood put forward in personal and development psychology, and the theories of socialisation. According to these theories, the child is, to exaggerate somewhat, like a being developing in steps towards adulthood, or the product of socialisation by the environment. I do not see the interpretive reproduction theory as entirely refuting the earlier theories. Rather, it adds an important and conflicting dimension: children are understood as active and creative parties to the process of interaction, and childhood is conceptualised more as a collective than an individual process. Child research may be understood as describing children individually, whereas childhood research emphasises childhood as a collective process.

The interpretive element points to the creative and innovative aspects of children's involvement in society. According to Corsaro (1997, 18), it shows that children create a peer culture of their own by creatively taking information from adults and applying it to their own conceptions. The reproduction in turn indicates that the children do not only assimilate the society and culture, but that they also take an active part role in the production and transformation of culture (Corsaro 1997, 18). Children do not just reproduce the old; they interpret society and culture in a new way. Although they may, through their own activities, take part in the workings of society, they are part of the existing social structure and its reproduction (Corsaro 1997, 18; also Prout & James 1990, 28). Childhood cannot therefore be separated from social status, gender and ethnicity (James & Prout 1990, 4).

Therefore, research on social work can be characterised as searching for new frameworks. Similarly, Williams and Popay (1999, 179) note the possibility of generating a new paradigm of welfare research and practice. Such research has been prompted by criticism of, for example, the structuralist mode, which has tended to neglect individual experience and agency, leaving the recipients of public welfare as largely forgotten inhabitants of the research terrain (Williams & Popay 1999, 157, 164). As in childhood research children are interpreted as creative agents, the same features are inherent to social work research. Hence the welfare subjects, including children, are understood as creative agents, acting upon, negotiating and developing their own strategies of welfare management.

## The ethnographic research material

Research methods such as ethnographic methodology and discourse analysis, which are suitable for the study of everyday situations and interactions, have been gaining ground in childhood research, and have succeeded in broadening the study of children to include the study of childhood (Prout & James 1990, 8-9). Strandell (1992, 23) regards the reformulation of the essence of children and childhood as one outcome of the new methodological approach. In establishing the research context as an interpretive state, it is assumed that the children's interpretation of this state and what is expected of them will influence the research results (*ibid.*).

This different theoretical and methodological application of ethnography is becoming increasingly prevalent in various disciplines, the caring sciences among them (Boyle 1994, 160, 170-174). There are also signs of it in Finnish sociological research (e.g. Peräkylä 1990). The use of participant observation and discussions with the subjects of study are generally associated with ethnography (Lareau & Shulz 1996, 3; Boyle 1994, 158, 165).

My research is mainly centred on small-scale holistic ethnography, of which I have written an interpretive and comprehensive account. I have also searched for ideas in literature, by talking to children and adults who take care of children, and also by participating in the everyday activities of children. My aim has been to achieve "a good enough ethnography", which means that as a researcher, I have had to analyse the way I conceptualise and theorise my research, the way I produce my materials, and the nature of my interaction with the subjects of my study (Herz 1996, 517).

There are many ways of writing an ethnographic report, and they are most clearly visible in two opposing schools of thought, one emphasising the interpretive nature of a text (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 11) and the other aiming to provide as accurate and realistic a picture possible (Schwalbe 1996, 539). As I see it, even though a researcher is writing about living people, the written text will be the product of a number of interpretations which the reader further interprets from his or her own point of view. The potential of a study to capture the reality, lives and deaths of real people is limited. I personally emphasise the interpretive nature of my text, written about

living people and their activities in a specific context. I view it as an interpretation of the activities and inhabited spaces of children, rather than as a realistic description of conditions (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 11). In this respect my work is located in the social constructionist research tradition (see Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993; Miller & Holstein 1993).

In the way in which I use it, ethnography refers both to my fieldwork and to my research methods (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 25).<sup>1</sup> I have approached the everyday activities of children in a hospital and a children's home in many different ways. My research material was produced in the Helsinki region in Southern Finland in 1996, and supplemented in the spring of 1997. All in all it consists of 140 photos, 20 group interviews (see Merton et al. 1990), notes taken during participant observation and other literary material, amounting to a total of 892 pages of text. The group interviews were conducted with the nursing staff at seven children's homes and four wards at two hospitals, where I also examined the premises. Viewing the same phenomenon via different materials makes the interpretation of everyday life more reliable.

My main method of research has been participant observation, primarily including contact with the children, their caregivers and guardians. The participant observation took place in the somatic ward of one hospital and the long-stay unit of one children's home. It consisted of watching, listening, chatting with people and discussion. I have taken the observation situations as being states of interpretive interaction in which the children were active participants. I observed eight children in all. According to Boyle (1994, 172), the ideal size of an observation group is five, in order to most significantly reveal the group culture (see also Whyte 1981). There were five children in the children's home group I observed and three in the hospital group, their ages ranging from 5–17. The duration of the observation was approximately eight months, including individual visits at the beginning and observation periods of around one month at both the hospital and the children's home at its conclusion.

Participant observation with children differs from that with adults. Fine & Sandstrom (1988, 75–76) describe the observation of children with three words: responsibility, respect and reflection. Because children may need protection against the consequences of their action, adults



usually feel morally responsible for them. Respect is a particular research approach in which children are respected on their own terms. It incorporates the principle that, like adults, children have the right to refuse to take part in research. By reflection, Fine & Sandstrom mean that the researcher tries to understand the lives of the children on their own terms. (ibid.)

## Reflexive ethnography

The approach at which I have arrived for my research is reflexive ethnography. At different stages throughout the research process I have had to consider matters such as how to enter the field, how to conduct the observation and interviews, the role of the researcher and the relationship between the researcher and the subject of study. Lareau & Shulz (1996, 4), for example, claim that the researcher's action moulds the research results. The researcher must be prepared to reformulate the research questions and their ramifications on the collection and analysis of the material.<sup>2</sup>

In producing my material, I have simultaneously acted as a participant in the activities of the community under study. I use the term produce rather than collect, because collection suggests that the items for study exist in the field in anticipation of being gathered by the researcher. The production of material illustrates my view of jointly produced knowledge, which is interpreted by the researcher. According to Kimmo Jokinen (1997, 25), interpretation demands membership in the culture that is the subject of interpretation. This does not, however, mean merely being present, since the interpretation process draws on certain theories and concepts. In conceptualising and interpreting culture, the researcher constitutes the target culture in his or her own specific way. Woven into this interpretation are numerous ways of life, practices and experiences, some of which are similar, others of which are dissimilar. (Jokinen 1997, 25.)

As opposed to referring to membership, I prefer to use the term involvement, although in other respects I share Jokinen's view on the multidimensional nature of the research process involved in the production and interpretation of material. I have adopted the role of a moderate participant (Spradley 1980, 60), which means that I have been

able to observe, to ask questions and to forge trusting relations as a researcher, but I have not become a member of the group. I have not sought to win the children's friendship; instead, I have tried to establish a positive contact. Strandell (1995) has stressed the absence of authority in entering the field. In other words, the researcher communicates friendship while simultaneously adhering to the role of adult. The roles of adult and researcher lacking authority more or less correspond to my position within the groups.

Through my participant observation I have been involved in interaction situations incorporating discourse, other activities and feelings. According to Heller (1979, 7), to feel means to be involved in something. The involvement varies, and it is not usually conscious. (Heller 1979, 11-13). The feelings may remain in the background, but they are nonetheless a part of human activity.

Reflexive knowledge production may be regarded as a research approach. Reflexivity is manifest in ethnographic research as participation by the researcher in the everyday lives of the persons studied, as interaction between the researcher and the group, and also in the fact that the research problem is developed through this process (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 16, 37; Boyle 1994, 165; Ely et al. 1993, 37-38). Reflexivity also gives the children room to participate in the production of the research material on their own terms.

In my research, reflexivity has also meant that the research problem has been transformed and further clarified in the process (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 25; Strauss & Corbin 1990). It has been challenging to seek out ways of producing knowledge that provide information on the way children live (see Ely et al. 1993, 57). Since I am unable as a researcher to see things through the eyes of the people I study, it is also impossible for me as an adult to see things through children's eyes. In order to bring the children's perspective into focus, I have consciously avoided ward staff meetings and "reports". I do not want the definitions produced exclusively by adults, and the official views on children and their activities to colour my own interpretations (cf. Strandell 1995, 27). Adults have been present in the observation situations, and in this context have provided me with their own interpretations of the everyday lives and the states of the lives of the children. This could not be avoided, nor have I wished to avoid it, however, I have not actively sought these interpretations.

## The researcher's self-reflexivity

Reflexivity is part of the interaction between the ethnographic researcher and the subjects of study, although it also calls for self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher. As a researcher I have been part of an interactive research process, but at the same time my interpretation has been influenced by my choice of both theories and concepts. According to Geertz (1973, 30; also Jokinen 1997, 27), a good interpretation is distinguished by the fact that it either adds something to the existing corpus of knowledge, or it incorporates questions and answers raised in earlier studies in a new way.

My own life experiences and attitudes are bound up with the topic of study, its handling and interpretations (Ely et al. 1993, 37), and the various stages in the research process have aroused a wealth of emotions in me (also Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 66; Lahelma & Gordon 1997, 18). In investigating my own feelings I have resorted not only to work counselling, but also to psychological counselling in order to analyse the aspects of my research that have delighted me, my fears and uncertainties, as well as the situations I have experienced (cf. Hyrck 1995, 19; Peräkylä 1990, 167). Through work counselling I have been able to analyse events that occurred in the field and the emotions that they evoked in me. In my view, Peräkylä (1990, 167) is correct in saying that the fieldworker engaged in participant observation must be able to both overcome the difficulties he or she usually encounters in dealing with other people, and correspondingly draw on his or her own personal resources.

Furthermore, research is not simply a question of methodology and theorising; to a large extent it is also a process of writing. It is interaction with both the written page and the potential reader. Much of my writing has been the outcome of discovering questions by reading the texts by others, or discussing issues with others that have set me thinking and writing myself. Morgan (1992, 65-71) says that one of the main tasks of a text is to cause us to engage in dialogue with ourselves and with what we read. In this way we re-read ourselves.

In writing for myself, I have also written for my readers (see Game & Metcalfe 1996, 41). I have hoped that my readers be simultaneously demanding yet kind. This, in my view, is being critical in the true sense of the word.

## Respect for the children

Respect for the children means that they are given respect on their own terms. Firstly, I have assumed in my research that respecting the children is central to the nature of the situations in which I have been able to observe them. Secondly, I have had to consider my attitude toward the children's right to refuse to participate in my research. When asked if they wished to take part, two of the children refused. What does this indicate? Let us now examine these two issues in greater detail.

Before embarking on my fieldwork it occurred to me that bedtime rituals might reveal some extremely important information on the children's everyday routines. However, once I was in the field and had given the matter more thought I decided it was neither tactful nor even necessary to my research to intrude in the children's intimate situations (cf. Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 22). In the children's home the youngest children go to bed first and sleep in their own rooms. In the hospital, either one or both of the parents were present when their child went to bed, at which point I chose to withdraw myself from the situation. Rather than being present in person, I have been content with reported information (cf. Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 22).

There was one exceptional situation in which a child (Kaisa) in one of the children's homes asked me as they were having supper:

*Why don't you ever stay and put me to bed? Why don't you?* She gazed at me with big round eyes and sat her teddy beside me as we were having supper. Teddy's paw reached out for the handle of the tea cup and there was a spoon in the cup. When the time came for Kaisa to go to bed, I asked her whether she wanted me to put her to bed. She said she did. One of the nurses told me what to do: Kaisa liked being stroked behind her ear, being caressed and sung to. In this way I was able to enter into Kaisa's bedtime rituals. The teddy who had been at supper with us went to bed beside her.

However eager the researcher is to collect as much material as possible, he or she must never impose on the children. My very presence was a trial for some, and I am sure that if I had been present on every occasion the children would have felt uneasy. As such, I tried to respect their privacy.

Respecting the children also meant allowing them to refuse to participate in the research. The parents of one of the children in the hospital refused to give their consent, however the other parents and children there agreed. In the case of the children's home, I have given more thought to the reasons for and significance of the children's refusal.

I knew that from a research ethical point of view, I had arrived at an important stage: How do I personally hear the child? In practice, this meant debating whether or not to select a new unit or a completely different children's home. This was concretised for me just as I was entering the space to be observed and a couple of youngsters told me they did not want me there. The staff had been informed of my research project and my request to observe the work of the unit. On the whole they were favourably disposed towards the project and felt it was important. The staff then selected the unit for me to observe. I got to know the staff, and I agreed with the caregiver in charge about how to go about the observation process.

The staff had told the children about me and asked them how they felt about my being there. One of the children had been against it, and said that she did not want to be a 'guinea pig'. She was seconded by another child, resulting in my receiving quite a cold reception. The other five children agreed to my presence.

This was one of the most difficult moments in the entire research process. It set me thinking about whether there was any other way of approaching the children, about the reasons why the children were against my research and, above all, my coming to observe them. Ely et al. (1994, 23), quoting the field experiences of a student called Hilary, report a similar situation:

"I have learned that it is curious but true that the process of 'entering the field' never quite ends when you do... research. You must not only get the support of your original gatekeeper, as I have mentioned, you must get the aid of others who are more closely connected to the field that you want to observe. Often you will get the overt cooperation of such individuals because they are given no choice, but if they resent your presence or feel threatened by it in some way, they can find ways of sabotaging your opportunities for observing." (Ely et al. 1994, 23)

When told about my research and asked whether they would agree to participate, the children replied in different ways. Two said 'no' and five 'yes'. They were given an opportunity to voice their opinions, and they did so. In this respect they had a choice. Perhaps the children who said 'no' wanted to test whether or not their opinions would be heard and respected. According to Fine & Sandstrom (1988, 31), children should be given a real and just opportunity to refuse to take part in a study. On the other hand, their refusal may be a reaction to the staff's enquiry, and their way of opposing those in charge. Then again, no one necessarily wants to be observed at close range. The children's replies reflect an atmosphere in which they are free to express themselves and their opinions.

Strandell (1994, 30) writes that children have not conventionally been asked whether or not they mind participating in research. In this respect I have faced an ethical challenge by asking for their consent. My encounter with the children was thus the outcome of a lengthy process of seeking permission (cf. Bluebond-Langner 1978, 245).

The children refused before I had even met them. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1996 I wrote in my research diary:

"It is not sufficient to merely acquire permission to carry out research; in addition one must struggle to make oneself worth of the other person's trust. I suspect that the more disappointment a person has experienced, the more difficult this is. Why let someone near you who will soon disappear or may let you down? Trust is not built in a moment, and what if there is not sufficient potential for it?"

However, the researcher cannot, in the opinion of Fine & Sandstrom (1988, 31), abandon a group because one or more of its members refuses to take part in the research process. Questions should not be addressed to those refusing to participate, their activities should not be recorded on tape, and they should not be included in any book or article. If they are part of a group, they may be included as part of the group in the report descriptions. It is unethical to pressure these individuals into participating.

I tried to talk to the young people who had refused about their views, and I also consulted the staff. Finally, I came to the conclusion that I could not realistically expect to find a group in which all of its members

were willing to participate in my research project. I decided that I would make a point of not chatting to those who refused to participate, nor would I make any notes on them except in the context of their being part of the group. By the time I began my intensive observation, one of the two who had refused had moved to an apartment of her own. This was already being planned when I first asked her to participate, although I was unaware of this at the time.

The children's refusal is no doubt an indication of their strength and their desire to protect their community. I had come up against boundaries which I would not have encountered if I had introduced myself as a trainee. The children justified their critical attitude by saying that they felt the unit was their home. The other reason they gave was the feeling that the cosy ambience of the children's home would be disrupted by the presence of an outsider. They assumed that I looked upon the children's home as an institution, whereas for them it was home. I viewed this as an extremely telling situation. How easy it was for me, an outsider, to speak of an institution, when for the children living there it was home.

It is also possible that the two who refused did not want to be tarred with the prejudices that exist about children's homes, which they might well encounter. I did not ask the young person still living in the home who had refused to take part about what she did. I included her activities in my notes when she was part of the group and the episodes I observed. We were both in the group, and we shared some very positive moments. My visits, my discussions, and with time, my presence among the children became clearer. The fact that I was only there for a given time, in which they were able to get to know me to some extent, undoubtedly helped us to get along with each other.

The final gatekeepers to the field were thus the children whose everyday activities I wanted to examine. The difficulty was in getting them to accept my observation of the group without their being overly conscious of it. Each individual is just like a separate field demanding an approach all of its own (see Ely et al. 1993, 31-32). Not even the researcher can get close to all the people she meets. She must not be too hard on herself, as she, too, has her own distinct personality. This is something we should probably all accept both in everyday life and in research. Furthermore, it is easier to get close to people who do not feel threatened.

## Responsibility

The study of children differs from the study of adults particularly because of the difference in the researcher's authority (Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 14; Hatch 1990, 253). However much the researcher tries to bridge the power gap between adult and child, a gap will inevitably remain, and its elimination would be ethically questionable. An adult, a participant observer-researcher, can never pass unnoticed in a group of children.

The participant observer has no formal authority over the children. Hart (1979, 30) works on the assumption that the researcher spending an extensive amount of time with the children he or she is studying must gain the approval of the parents. The researcher must therefore consult the adults responsible for the children, which is one way of avoiding possible misunderstandings. (Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 23; also Hart 1979, 30.) It also takes time for a stranger to win the children's confidence.

In carrying out my research, I first negotiated and talked with the adults and then gradually got to know the children. I reserved time for the children to 'check me out', during which time I talked more with the adults, allowing the children to observe me. They were thus able to watch me from afar, to come closer and retreat at their own leisure, until after a couple of weeks I was able to sit among them without their being constantly aware of my presence. However, they were never able to totally ignore my presence any more than I was. While I never became invisible, I did become 'part of the furniture'.

Corsaro (1985, 118) has given quite a lot of thought to the size difference between adults and children, specifically focusing on questions of power. He spent long periods of time with children in a day nursery and developed a "reactive" strategy for entering the field. He never took the initiative in engaging in interaction with the children, but rather always waited for the children to make the first move. Bluebond-Langner (1978, xi), on the other hand, observed children in a hospital and applied a form of play therapy. Her aim was to reveal the children's thought process as accurately as possible, to discover their interactive strategies and their understanding of their own situations. Play, in her opinion, permitted the children to reflect on their own behaviour without being asked about it directly. She felt that direct questions would act as an obstacle in the study of the phenomenon. (Bluebond-Langner 1978, xi.)



My strategy was akin to Corsaro's in that I generally waited for the children to take the initiative in engaging in conversation or some activity, although in some situations I did adopt a more active role. I did not really interview the children, rather, I reacted to their questions or took up a subject raised by them and joined in the conversation in whatever way seemed natural (cf. Whyte 1981, 302).

As an exception, I interviewed two young people over the age of fourteen in their own rooms. On these occasions I guided the conversation by asking questions (Uusitalo 1991, 90). The young people were eager to talk about themselves. In this sense the sessions differed from the observation situations, in which the children gave either brief or playful answers to my questions. There may be several reasons for this. One is that the children may well seek to entertain one another by giving the researcher crazy answers. On the other hand, the researcher's questions about everyday life and the difficulty in answering them are indicative to me of the discursive and practical consciousness conceptualised by Giddens (1982, 30-32). Certain everyday situations are difficult to put into words because they are deeply rooted in our practical consciousness. When someone inquires about everyday situations, they may well sound banal and uninteresting, although the difficulty in answering them may arouse mirth.

Since the focus of my research has been on the everyday lives of children as opposed to their worlds of experience, I have chosen the Bluebond-Langer approach of becoming acquainted with children and the things they do. Like Corsaro, I have tended to wait rather than take the initiative, and I joined in activities at their suggestion. In order to do this I adopted a low profile, sat down and prepared myself to listen. This may sound simple, however in practice it was not always easy to simultaneously allow time for the children to make their own suggestions and be actively present.

## Producing the everyday

I began by conducting participant observation sessions, by acquainting myself with the children, their caregivers/nurses and their daily routines. I watched, listened and asked; I observed anything that aroused my scientific curiosity and placed what I saw and heard in perspective. At

some points I was more active, while at others I remained in the background and observed (see Atkinson 1992, 2). My aim was to keep an open mind and chat with the children so there was as little structure and guidance to the conversation as possible.

The children formulated their own conceptions of who the researcher was and what she wanted to know. (Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 17). The youngest reckoned at the beginning that I must be a queen or a princess. My earrings and necklace and my overall appearance must have suggested this. One of the children referred to me as a writer. And indeed, I had introduced myself as someone writing a book about children who live in a children's home or are in hospital.

I noticed that although I always explained why I was present in the same way, people's attitudes to me and my project varied. To some adults I represented a threat to the work they were doing, while others felt I might pass on the message of their exhausting working conditions, and for some I added a touch of variety to the ordinary monotony of their day. To the children I was generally seen as a companion and possible playmate, while a few viewed me as a threatening adult outsider. The children conceived of what I did in relation to my "book" and writing. While carrying out his own fieldwork, William Whyte (1996, 27; also 1981, 300) also noticed that people developed their own explanations for what he was doing. In actuality, he was writing a book about Corneville. People's attitudes toward him depended more on their personal view of him than on the way in which he explained the objectives of his research.

Being a participant observer, I did not take part in the work of the home or ward, instead participating in the day-to-day activities in the way that seemed most natural to me in my capacity as researcher.<sup>3</sup> At the children's home I joined the children and staff for meals and coffee, set or cleared the table, read the newspaper or a women's magazine, sat in the kitchen or living room, watched what the children were doing, played with, chatted and read to them. In the hospital I was with the children in their ward rooms or went with them to other parts of the hospital. In their rooms we watched television, made things, sang, played games, or I sat and watched them doing things (cf. Bluebond-Langner 1978, 246-247). Sometimes I simultaneously chatted with the child's mother or father.

My experience with the children was the same as with adults; I got

to know some better than others. All of the children I observed in the hospital were between the ages of 5 and 8, and I got to know them quite well. At the children's home I got to know the three children under the age of 12 better than the two who were over 14. I spent most of my time with the younger children, and felt that they were acceptant of my company. They approached me and chatted to me of their own accord, tugging me by the hand to join in their games and chatting amongst themselves in my presence.

In a way, the children themselves assigned me my roles: with the younger children I achieved the role of a familiar adult, whereas to the older children I remained more in the role of a strange observer. This was difficult, however I did not alter it. Perhaps it requires a certain kind of personality to approach young people, and also possibly takes more time to get to know them than the younger children. Young people have more rights than younger children, with which they command their own space.

Roger Hart (1979, 32) has made an ethnographic and environmental-psychological study of children's activities in their immediate home environment. He encountered children in the streets, in yards, in the fields and at school. He was more successful than I in getting to know young people, in that young people command a larger physical area than young children. Since the latter occupy a smaller area, it is easier for their parents, adults or a researcher to encounter them.

At the beginning of the observation period I tried to gain an overall impression of the children's daily routine. In time, my observations concentrated on the functional and chronological episodes in which I was involved. I made my notes after interaction episodes with children, parents, nurses/caregivers and doctors, and they are my interpretation of what we produced together. They are not only the children's interpretations, for in a way the children were both the focus of the discourse and involved in the production of their own stories. The presence of adults is a firm feature of everyday life in both a children's home and a hospital, and I did not, therefore, confine my discussions solely to the children. I attempted to confine my observations as far as possible to "natural" everyday situations, and did not try to modify them. The following entry in my diary was written in the hospital setting, and describes both the way in which the children participated in the production of my material in addition to our direct interaction.

If I address a question to the parent, the child tends to comment on it. The child would look at his parent and talk to him, but what the child said was also intended for me. Similarly, a child in the children's home might comment on something that I said in talking to one of the caregivers. The children sometimes seemed to be disconcerted by direct comments, sometimes giving only one word answers. When they are allowed to join in the conversation, they comment freely without any embarrassment. We proceed on their terms, as it were, and not in a way in which they might get the sense that a strange adult comes along and fires questions at them.

This entry brings out the significance of jointly produced information, and serves as a reminder that joint production is more inherent to conversation than to the interview situation. According to the children's home staff, doing something such as having supper or baking together with the children stimulates the most active conversations. I also noticed that when I chatted with to the children as we did something together, the discourse flowed naturally. Here is an example of a note I made after chatting with Kaisa in her room:

Kaisa is listening to a pop channel on the radio while humming a song by Tina Turner. I am so busy chatting with and watching her that I bang my head on the edge of the sleeping platform. I say that this corner is made for children, not adults. Kaisa says: *My mum always bangs her head on it, too*. I say she'll have to grow quite a lot before she bangs her head on it. She stands up and I measure how much she will have to grow. Kaisa knows: *I'm going to be here until I'm grown up*. She shows me her baby doll and where to press it to make it cry.

## Conclusion

What is reflexivity? What does it demand of the researcher? What can it offer the study and practice of social work?

One of the main contributions of my research is methodological. I call my way of approaching children reflexive ethnography, and it is part of ethnographic research methodology. It underlines the adult's

responsibility as a researcher, respect for the children as subjects of research, as well as a desire to understand how children live. Reflexive knowledge production may be regarded as a research approach by the subject. Participant observation, the method used in my research, permits both the researcher to participate in the everyday lives of the children, and the children to participate in the production of the research material. Reflexivity calls for sensitivity on the part of the researcher. It requires that the researcher be aware of others' feelings, through which he or she will be able to find the methods best suited to the situations presenting themselves throughout the course of the research process.

The other main conclusion of my research is that the direction of the research focus is important. Activities that may seem insignificant and pass unnoticed become significant. The children in both the children's home and the hospital become people with feelings who experience everyday joys and sorrows. The difficulties do not vanish in my research; instead they become part of ordinary human life. The constraints on the children's activities are to a great extent already imposed on the spaces I have studied, although the children make use of the social infrastructure. By drawing on both the skills and knowledge they have learnt and their own wits, they build themselves a place of their own. They alleviate the tedium of their routine everyday lives by seeking out pleasures – a typical feature of their everyday dichotomy. Thus, they do not merely submit to the authority of adults and institutions, since their activities recreate both the space and its culture. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that the social order in the spaces I studied is maintained by the children's involvement, engagement and emotions. Without the sense of being an insider, important human relations and emotions, the children would not be prepared to commit themselves to life in an institution.

Research conducted reflexively is revealed as a complex chronological and contextual process. Vital elements of this process are the human interaction between the researcher and the subjects, and the researcher's self-reflexivity on his or her theoretical premises, concepts and methods. Reflexivity does not silence the subjects' own voices or ways of expressing themselves. As such, the researcher moves closer to the way in which the subjects understand their everyday lives.

## Notes

1 Ethnography has no prototype, nor is there any unanimity as to its nature (Boyle 1994, 162). Ethnography usually refers to the observation and written description of the activities of some group, but it may also refer to fieldwork.

Participant observation has traditionally been used in social anthropological and ethnographic research to study a community for so long that it reveals its members' own perspective. Ethnographic research has accordingly been described as holistic ethnography, and as distinct from structural ethnography (Tesch 1992, 24). Structural ethnography concentrates on describing the meanings assigned by cultural groups and manifest especially in speech (*ibid.*). In holistic ethnography, the researcher participates in the everyday lives of the people studied, spending time with them. He watches them, listens to what they say and asks questions. He produces materials of several kinds to throw light on the phenomenon under . (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 1.)

It may be assumed in ethnographic research that the culture and its meanings are common and shared (Geertz 1973, 10-13; Boyle 1994, 160). Culture has a number of definitions, and the theoretical approach of the ethnographic researcher affects the way he interprets the discourse and behaviour of the people he is studying. According to Boyle (1994, 160), the researcher, in interpreting people's speech and action, may understand the shared meanings which we call culture. Geertz (1973, 14) attaches culture to a specific context that can be described with understanding (also Geertz 1983, 68-70). Geertz (1973, 14) uses the concept of thick description to refer to the understanding description of culture. This is not content merely to list social events, behaviour and institutions; it also interprets their contextual meaning.

Ethnographic research can represent different genres, types of literature, etc. The Chicago school, for example, roamed the streets and city districts, whereas the Street Corner school confined itself to one street, block or street corner. (Atkinson 1992, 33-34.) Often quoted examples of classical ethnographic research are William Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943/1981) and Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977/1980).

2 The analysis of my research material has been a complex process composed of at least three stages. At the first stage, I addressed the material as an entity, like Lareau (1996, 210), and familiarised myself with it (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 210). I read all the material I had written and produced, listened to the interviews, collected hints, ideas and comments. I then classified the contents of my notes in event episodes describing the children's activities. I sought out concepts to help me understand what was happe-

ning in the various descriptions in the material (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 209). At the third stage, I formulated my research questions by drawing on my research material and identifying the main themes, and then divided the material into thematic entities.

- 3 According to James Spradley, the researcher engaging in participant observation examines his own and others' reactions. He asks himself why he reacted to events in the way he did and examines them from many angles. He feels he is both a participant and an outsider, and tries to come to terms with this. He should be aware of the things which others either do not notice or take for granted. He makes notes on what he sees and experiences. (Spradley 1980, 58). In discussing note-taking, Annette Lareau (1996, 219), for example, points out that she is a researcher observing situations. This has prevented her from feeling integrated with the group she has been studying.

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### III

## DISCOVERING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES



*Kirsi Juhila & Tarja Pösö*

## LOCAL CULTURES IN SOCIAL WORK

*Ethnographic understanding and discourse analysis of probation work*

### Introduction

“**T**here are many ways to be ‘empirical’; that is, ways to develop knowledge from systematic analysis of observations”, Catherine Kohler Riessman (1994, xii) says, calling for diversity in qualitative research in social work. So much goes on in contemporary social work, she continues, that we need diverse modes of inquiry, diverse approaches and methods. It is important that the tools applied are sensitive enough to uncover not only general tendencies, but also contextual particularities; that they appreciate the researcher’s reflexivity and standpoint; and that they draw on empirical evidence (*ibid.*, xv).

It is easy to agree with these ideas, although simultaneously we must not forget that the researcher is by no means the only agent whose role and reflection we should reflect upon in studies of social work. Meanings are also accomplished by other agents, i.e. by social workers and clients, without whom there would be no social work in the first place (cf. Payne 1997, 1-25). Our research programme, therefore, should also include the social worker and the client, as well as their interactions and the outcomes of their actions.

*Our intention in this article is to do social work research which is based on empirical evidence about social work practices, and which reflects upon its own methods and methodology.* The article is grounded in social constructionism and ethnomethodology, which is the theoretical and methodological platform for our application of discourse analysis and ethnography in studying practices of social work. The accent is on the linguistic side of interaction, on the social construction of reality through language. The choices we have made are intended to highlight the importance of a research approach which reaches the everyday core of social work by concentrating on the interactive and interpretative nature of a face-to-face encounter between a social worker and client. Simultaneously, we attempt to uncover how we can turn the joint efforts of social workers and researchers to construct an interpretation of what goes on in social work encounters into a resource.<sup>1</sup>

The social work encounters at the centre of our analysis are interviews aimed at assessing offenders' suitability for community service. The interviews were conducted by social workers of the Finnish Probation and After-Care Association. This is a job which is framed by various factors: legislation concerning community service, the legal system for which the assessments are provided, the guidelines of the Probation and After-Care Association, the educational and occupational background and the commitments of the staff involved, and so on. The assessment always involves the same routine: clients are interviewed on the basis of a structured schedule, and a report is written to a certain format. One might be inclined to think that there is very little room for movement, as the contents of the job are so strictly defined by the law, guidelines and routines. It is precisely this assumption of the nature of social work that makes the subject in the context of this article so interesting. Does there really exist social work that always follows the same pattern from one situation to the next, regardless of the actors and their interaction?

The question is familiar from earlier discussions on social work. Social work involves numerous practices, tasks and stages, which are often described as externally determined routine paperwork. What this implies is that this kind of work cannot qualify as 'real' social work, because it is so highly repetitive and routine. 'Real' social work, the assumption goes, is done in a non-bureaucratic environment in which the social worker is not obliged to fill out forms, write reports or fol-

low strict norms imposed on the work itself, on helping the client or on the client relationship (Howe 1996; Egelund 1997). However, we will show in this article that *even in the presence of strict external norms, social work is shaped by the interaction between the social worker and the client, with different elements of social work creatively applied and introduced in different situations and at different stages. The variation is not random, but rather reflects the influence of strong professional cultures.*

In this paper we will be presenting our interpretations and conclusions in an order that follows our research process. This serves two main purposes. On the one hand, it highlights the active role played by the researcher in generating the research material and in formulating the results, and on the other, it emphasises the reader's role in evaluating the material and the analysis. We will also be following the methodological instruction of Catherine Kohler Riessman (1994), who says that the study of social work should aim at making the practices of social work visible. Words are often more helpful than statistics in this exercise of 'visualising'; it is extremely difficult to capture the diversity of everyday reality in statistics. We follow Riessman's advice by introducing both the basic data of our study (encounters between social workers and clients) and the joint analyses made by researchers and social workers on the basis of this material, in addition to our own analyses. First, however, it is necessary to provide some background on our object of study.

## The assessment of suitability for community service as a social and legal issue

A community service order is essentially a criminal policy measure. It is an alternative to an unconditional custodial sentence, in which the convicted party expiates the offence by performing unpaid work for good causes. The punishment has various social objectives as well: the closer integration of the offender into society, the development of his social competencies and the promotion of attitudes that are favourable to society. (Yhdyskuntapalvelun suunnitteluryhmän mietintö 1990, 4-6; see also Grönfors 1986).

National legislation on community service dates from 1997, follow-

ing on a pilot project initiated in 1991. It was stressed from very early on that all community service orders were to be based on the assumption that the offender was capable of completing the service. This meant that it was necessary to implement procedures for assessment purposes. (Yhdyskuntapalvelutoimikunnan mietintö 1989, 13-14). There was some concern that these procedures might lead to a situation in which recruitment into community service might be inclined towards social selection, and therefore various support functions were attached to community service. The purpose of these functions is to give the most underprivileged offenders a better chance of being able to carry out their punishment by performing community service (Yhdyskuntapalvelun suunnitteluryhmän mietintö 1990, 2-3; Yhdyskuntapalvelutoimikunnan mietintö 1989, 15). It was decided that the need for services for social support should be evaluated in conjunction with the suitability assessments.

Finland (unlike some other countries, see Takala 1993) has no explicit set of criteria for determining an offender's suitability for community service. Legislation offers very little support: "Assessments shall take into account the suspected offender's capability and willingness to complete the service and other conditions". The Probation and After-Care Association says in its guidelines that special attention should be paid to the candidate's personal characteristics, such as motivation, determination, social skills and ability to control substance use (Ohjeita yhdyskuntapalvelun toimeenpanosta ...1997, 7). The Association has also arranged training for staff with a view towards harmonising assessment procedures (e.g. Kriminaalihuoltoyhdistyksen toimintakertomus 1996, 10).

Suitability assessments are made on the basis of face-to-face interviews. The social worker who is to make the assessment meets with the suspected offender on one or two occasions, and prepares a written report on the basis of these meetings. The final assessment is written and signed by the Director of the Regional Office and filed with the District Court. According to Takala (1993), court orders follow the recommendations of these assessments with only very few exceptions. Clearly then, these assessments have had a very definite impact on court rulings.

There are certain standard items that are covered in all assessment interviews; these include the client's training and education, occupa-



tion, employment, social relations, housing conditions, health, substance use and need for support services. Clients are also asked to sign the interview form as a mark of consent. Their signature is taken to indicate the client's willingness and preparedness to serve the mandated punishment in the form of community service (client consent also ensures compliance with the ILO convention concerning forced or compulsory labour). Client consent adds a very distinctive flavour to the whole assessment procedure. The suspected offender is not merely a passive object under assessment, but is also invited to express his will and commitment, which are crucial conditions for the enforcement of punishment. In other words, the tasks that are constructed for the client and the social worker in the assessment procedure are quite different. The probation officer's job is to collect information, weigh that information in relation to the client's suitability for community service, and present the client's case to individuals who were not present during the assessment. The client's job is to provide information, and to get it across in a manner that he believes is in his best interests. On the other hand, the client and the social worker stand in a bargaining position vis-à-vis each other, in that the assessment requires the active contribution and commitment of both parties. The relationship of dependence is mutual, and is also very much a two-way street as far as wielding influence and power is concerned. It is for these reasons that assessment practices involve so many contradictory elements, such as diagnosis and participatory bargaining. This, according to Peter Raynor (1985, 142-161), seems increasingly to be the case in probation work, which is becoming more and more oriented towards the writing and preparation of reports and statements (see also Corden & Preston-Shoot 1987).

The Probation and After-Care Association has been assigned the responsibility of performing suitability assessment and enforcing community service orders for two main reasons. Firstly, it has extensive experience in social inquiry investigation (Yhdyskuntapalvelutoimikunnan mietintö 1989), and secondly, it has experience in working with criminal offenders, which means that it also possesses considerable knowledge on the provision of support services which may be necessary in connection with community service. (Yhdyskuntapalvelun suunnitteluryhmän mietintö 1990, 10, 25). However, neither committee reports nor the regulations concerning community service orders refer

explicitly to the Association's expertise in social work. It is interesting that there is also no mention of social work in the Association's own guidelines for the enforcement of community service orders (*Ohjeet yhdyskuntapalvelun toimeenpanosta...* 1997); probation officers are not instructed to perform social work, rather, their job description derives from legislation concerning community service and related administrative expectations. However, the social work aspect can be found in the socially-motivated mission statement of the Probation and After-Care Association, which says that the Association's object is to prevent recidivism and to reduce exclusion that leads to crime. In addition, most people engaged in the community service sector have received some kind of training in social work. The Association has attempted to incorporate the perspectives of social work into probation work through supplementary training schemes (Kostiainen 1994), and many people at the Association are of the opinion that the work they do can definitely be considered social work. On the other hand, there are also those who say that social work is beyond the responsibilities of probation work.

There has been quite widespread scepticism about the integration of community service and social work on grounds that this implies mixing support with supervision and that the involvement of social work only serves to tone down the elements of separation, selection, supervision and punishment that are supposed to be part and parcel of community service. Community service is not about helping and supporting, but about enforcing a punishment, which is a crucial distinction that some say should be retained. There are also those who say that the administrative and juridical supervision of community service is so close and so strict that there is no room for 'real', psychosocially oriented social work (Kangaspunta 1994a, 1994b; Santala, 1995), and that this is why all social work input should be confined to the offering of support services. Critical analysis of the relationship between 'pure' social work and punishment has largely dominated an otherwise meagre debate in the social sciences and in the field of criminal policy on the relationship between probation work, social work and community service (Karjalainen et al. 1988; Karjalainen 1989; Kääriäinen 1994). Plans for a more systematic incorporation of social work into community service or probation work have received far less attention (see e.g. Kaakinen & Vuolle 1992).

It is interesting then to look more closely at how, if at all, social

work is constructed as part of community service in a situation in which the content and role of social work are far from being unambiguous or assumed, despite the fact that its practice is governed by strict administrative and legal rules and norms. In light of these guidelines, the rules and regulations, public debate, the Association's recruitment decisions and staff training, suitability assessment may be regarded either as social work or as something else entirely. In the discussion below, we will be looking at how the staff themselves define the work they do, and how they go about their work at two of the Association's regional offices, both of which are very experienced in probation work as well as in suitability assessment.

## Methodology, data and analysis

The methodological roots of this study can be traced back to two traditions: social constructionism (specifically the line of inquiry which focuses on social problems) and ethnomethodology. The idea to approach human interaction as a linguistic process which produces social reality comes from the tradition of *social constructionism*. In the process of speaking and writing, we are not describing the world that lies beyond the language we use, but we are actively constructing different versions of that world (Burr 1995; Gergen 1994; Shotter 1993). Social constructionism provides a useful platform for an investigation of social work as an activity that in itself creates reality. The assumption is not that social work reflects social problems that are regarded as given facts, but rather the emphasis is on how these problems are defined both in and through activity. James Holstein and Gale Miller (1997; 1993) have written about the interpretation of social problems in the context of human service and social control organisations. According to them, the work that is done in these organisations is "interpretive activity that accomplishes reality. We accomplish social problems as we communicate about, categorise, organise, argue, and persuade one another that social problems really do exist. Thus, we produce the practical reality of social problems through social problems work" (Holstein & Miller 1997, ix). Face-to-face encounters are not the only arena in social work in which social problems are accomplished; there are numerous other arenas as well. For example, written statements on

clients, and political decisions regarding the allotment of economic resources in social work are also interpretive activity in this sense (Jokinen, Juhila & Pösö 1999).

*Ethnomethodology*, our second methodological root, is interested in how people describe and explain various states of affairs to one another within the context of their everyday life, while simultaneously maintaining 'what we all know'. (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984; Pollner 1987; Potter 1996, 42-67.) Ethnomethodology provides a useful foundation for the study of social work when we are interested in practices, the construction of practices, and in states of affairs made possible by those practices. Our attention is drawn to the structures of everyday routines and activities, and we aim at making them visible and avoid taking them for granted as such. (Cicourel 1968; Pithouse 1987; Peräkylä 1990; Forsberg 1998.)

The choice of this kind of dual methodological foundation for our study of assessment procedures means that we must necessarily focus our attention on those everyday activities in which the participants (i.e. social workers and clients) accomplish the assessment in and through their mutual interaction. Suitability for community service is a construct accomplished jointly by social workers and clients (through their conversations.) in their talk. As such, suitability is not understood as a presupposed fact that is either successfully or unsuccessfully unearthed during the assessment process. Suitability and the practice of establishing suitability are inextricably interwoven. The everyday activities of social work, such as the practices applied to establishing suitability, are largely based on conversation and social interaction (Baldock & Prior 1981; Forsberg 1998; Hall 1997; Jaatinen 1996; Jokinen & Juhila 1996; Rostila 1997). This is why our two data sets are based primarily on the conversations between different participants:

1. Assessment interviews, in which social workers meet face to face with clients
  - 22 tape-recorded and transcribed interviews
  - 13 from the Probation and After-Care Association's regional office x and 9 from regional office y<sup>2</sup>.
2. Joint discussions between social workers and researchers
  - 3 discussions at regional office x and 3 at regional office y
  - 2 discussions involving social workers from both regional offices

Face-to-face discussions between social workers and clients, such as suitability assessment interviews, lie at the very heart of everyday social work. They are the situations in which the clients' problems are defined and accounts are given; in which the reasons and possible solutions for these problems are weighed and discussed; and in which joint interpretations of them are constructed. (Miller & Holstein 1997). It is important to examine these discussions in close detail, as doing so will allow us to highlight the 'skilful' consistency of everyday social work. The tool with which we analyse the assessment interviews is *discourse analysis*.<sup>3</sup> Discourse analysis approaches language as a social activity in which the words, sentences and turns of participants assume their meanings in relation to the words, sentences and turns of other participants (Edwards 1997; Potter 1996). In other words, the participants' accounts and descriptions are analysed in their own context. With regard to the analysis of the assessment interviews, this implies posing questions such as how the interpretation of suitability or non-suitability is constructed during the course of the interview, how the social worker and client orient their narration to one another, what kind of social worker and client positions are constructed during the conversation, etc.

Consisting of joint discussions between social workers and researchers, our second data set serves the purposes of *ethnographic research*. Ethnographic research is ultimately about entering a certain culture, gaining a basic knowledge and understanding of how the members of that culture interpret their world, and why they act the way they do; in a word, it is about exploring the socially shared. In order to gain access into a culture, the researcher must become involved in it, which most typically happens by way of participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). In this article we will also attempt to visualise the socially shared. However, rather than using the traditional method of participant observation, we aim at attaining ethnographic understanding through joint discussions with social workers. These discussions are based both on recorded extracts from the social workers' meetings with their clients, and on our own analyses produced jointly with the social workers involved in assessment making. This is a rather self-made application of the principles of ethnography compared to the traditional emphasis on fieldwork. Following Gale Miller (1997a; 1997b), our approach could also be described as the ethnography of institu-

tional discourse, in which the accent is on the study of everyday practices, and in which specific attention is devoted to the analysis of language use. We are hoping to offer some contribution to the kind of 'new ethnography' (Gubrium & Holstein 1994), which contends that ethnography is about the construction of the social environment, and that researchers are closely involved in this process. The key thing is not how the material is collected, but what kind of position is taken towards it. We begin from the assumption that our joint discussions will reveal routines, commitments, endeavours and values of institutional significance. Ultimately, these discussions are about nothing more and nothing less than the social workers' explication of the actions that occur in the discussions between them and their clients to us, researchers and outsiders.<sup>4</sup>

It would have been possible for us to use only one or the other data set or method.<sup>5</sup> However, we have opted to use both of them, and argue that doing so helps to uncover certain distinctive characteristics of social work (see also Juhila & Pösö 1999). The combination of the two data sets and the methods of discourse analysis and ethnography unfolded into a research process that proceeded through the following steps:

1. Reading through assessment interviews
2. Joint discussions between social workers and researchers
  - discussions based on extracts from interviews
  - discovery of comparative setting: two different cultures in regional offices
  - ethnographic understanding
3. Return to assessment interviews
  - elaboration of cultures
  - comparative setting de-emphasised: two different cultures, but not clearly tied to two regional offices
  - discourse analysis

We began by reading through the transcripts of the assessment interviews, making preliminary interpretations and selecting suitable extracts for our discussions with the social workers. We then arranged our joint discussions with the staff at two regional offices of the Probation After-Care Association, x and y. These discussions produced

a surprising twist in our study. In keeping with our ethnographic idea, we had expected to identify cultural interpretations related to the assessment of suitability for community service in these discussions. We had not prepared ourselves for performing any comparisons between the two regional offices. However, *comparison* was to become the third tool we applied in this study, because the ways in which the extracts were interpreted in the two offices suggested to us that they had two very different, essentially *local cultures*. By local cultures, we are referring to shared views and interpretations among social workers as to what suitability assessment is about, how the task should be approached, what its aims are and so on.<sup>6</sup> At the third stage of the research process we reverted back to the assessment interviews in order to examine them in closer detail using the tools of discourse analysis. We wanted to assess whether the participants in the interviews, the social workers and clients, talked the local cultures into existence in their interaction. The cultures had a definite presence in the interviews, but they were not as clearly tied to the two regional offices as the analysis of the joint discussions had led us to believe.

It is clear that in the course of this research process, and most directly as an outcome of our discussions with staff members, we have become privy to 'insider' information. Our knowledge and understanding of how the Probation and After-Care Association and its two regional offices work and operate has increased, as we simultaneously drifted further away from our positions as external analysts. Our competencies as analysts are entirely different now than what they were at the outset of the study. The interview material alone would not have led us to the interpretations we now suggest of two different local cultures. From this point of view, our choice of analytical tools is open to the criticism that the interpretations we suggest have been influenced by elements external to the interview material. On the other hand, we believe that a researcher always utilises some kind of interpretive frame, or at the very least conceptual tools offered by the method of analysis. We have tried to take special care to spell out our own perspective, which is grounded in ethnographic understanding.

As we move on now to reporting the results of the study, our intention is to retrace our steps throughout the research process, shifting back and forth between the various data sets. We begin by describing the temporal and local contexts of our joint discussions, in which we

first came across our concept of two distinct cultures of assessing suitability for community service, which we refer to as the cultures of appropriate and accurate knowing. We then continue by examining the interview material in greater detail.

## Ethnographic understanding and the element of surprise: local cultures in joint discussions

We had our first joint discussion with staff at regional office y of the Probation and After-Care Association in September of 1997, by which time we had already also held a number of joint discussions with staff from office x. We followed a set procedure in these discussions: we had picked certain extracts from the interview material, and on the basis of the transcriptions of those extracts we talked with the social workers about what had been occurring during these situations and why. We decided to begin the series of joint discussions with staff at regional office y with excerpts concerning substance use. We made this decision based on our experience that they would provide interesting points for discussion and were also crucial to the outcome of the assessment.<sup>7</sup>

After our first discussions at regional office y, we both felt very strongly that the contents of these discussions had been quite different from those we had had earlier at office x. We felt we had entered an entirely new cultural field. Discussing our surprising experience immediately after the meeting, we came to the conclusion that the difference was due to the fact that the staff at office y repeatedly stressed the importance of client advocacy and the relationship between the client and social worker. It was on this aspect that we subsequently decided to focus our attention; on what we argue represents office y's culturally predominant way of understanding and talking assessment work into existence. We decided to call this the *culture of appropriate knowing*. The 'discovery' of this culture can be attributed most particularly to the discussion in and around the following extract:



*Extract 1: The culture of appropriate knowing*

- 1 S: So what do you usually do with yourself?  
2 C: I'm unemployed.  
3 S: No, but I mean when you're doing something.  
4 C: Something what. I don't normally do anything. I just hang  
5 around and do nothing. 'Cos I've got no job.  
6 S: But that leaves you with plenty of leisure time.  
7 C: That's right. And then I drink because I have nothing else to do.  
8 S: Well now that's really...  
9 C: Well yeah.  
10 S: ... a leisure activity. Do you drink a lot?  
11 C: Well. Pretty heavily, yeah.  
12 S: Every day.  
13 C: Well it hasn't been every day for a couple of months now,  
14 but it was like that for about a year or so.  
15 S: Every day  
(Telephone rings, social worker on the phone for about 20 seconds.)  
16 S: Mmh (sounds of writing). The phone is a nice little gadget.  
17 It usually rings off the hook, but I don't feel like talking  
18 right now.  
19 So, you've been drinking everyday all year long.  
20 C: (Yeah.) Right.  
21 S: It's hard to believe by looking at you. That you've been  
22 drinking that heavily.  
23 C: Well, I haven't for the past couple of months. Just on the  
24 weekends.  
25 S: I mean there's no signs on the outside, it usually does show  
26 you know, when you really hit the bottle.  
27 C: Yeah.  
28 C: I guess I'm in really good shape.  
29 S: Mmm. And a good way of life otherwise. Ok, education.  
(y 14a, 5-7)<sup>8</sup>

In this extract the treatment of the question of alcohol use remains very brief, and we were quite interested in how the social workers interpreted this. The following interpretation unfolded in our joint discussions. The client has obviously chosen a confessional way of

talking about his drinking habits, which the social worker does not favour. So, she wants to slow down the client's 'open' discussion of his drinking. The phone-call helps to cut short this excessive openness. Sometimes it is in the client's best interest that the social worker does not know too much about his past life and problems, i.e. that the social worker is not knowledgeable about matters that might compromise the writing of a favourable report. In other words, the social workers felt that without the interruption, the client may well have gone on to reveal details about his drinking that might have cast some doubt over his ability to cope with community service.

This interpretation led to a debate that captured the very essence of the culture of appropriate knowing. Namely, the role and purpose of social work in the process of suitability assessment. The social workers shared the view that the purpose of the interview is to obtain information that is supportive of a favourable report and ultimately a community service order. A favourable report and the possibility of a community service order are in the best interest of the client because they will provide him with an opportunity to change his life, control his substance abuse problems and to stay out of prison. The focus of the assessment is thus on the present and future prospects of the client's life. The social workers also defined the community service order and the assessment as opportunities for social work; they create the possibility for face-to-face encounters with the client, for working with the client to create a good relationship of interaction, which is the first and most basic condition for effecting change through social work. Thus, the client's interests were thought to be more or less in line with the interests of social work. These themes were raised several times during our joint discussions.

In office x, the main concern was not to gather information that supported a community service order or to build up a good relationship of interaction between clients and social workers, but rather to get as accurate and reliable information as possible. Primarily, accuracy has to do with what kind of information about the client's life is considered necessary; it should describe the client's current life situation and the level of control he has over his life with as much accuracy as possible. Secondly, accuracy has to do with making accurate, truthful assessments about whether or not the client is suitable for community service. This implies a constant search for new information with which

to fill in the unfolding picture and ultimately reach accurate conclusions, even if they are sometimes in contradiction with the client's views. These principles and requirements of accuracy emerged quite clearly in our joint discussion based on extract two, which we used in our initial discussions at office x. It was not until after our discussions in office y that we realised that there existed a clear cultural difference calling for comparison, which led to the identification of the culture in office x as the *culture of accurate knowing*.

*Extract 2: The culture of accurate knowing*

- 1 S: We then have this uhm (pause) question of substance use.  
2 C: Well, as we've already seen it was excessive.  
3 S: It was?  
4 C: Yeah, it was over the top.  
5 S: I mean was, when do you mean?  
6 C: I mean the past years, I've only come to my senses in the  
7 past few years.  
8 S: Really?  
9 C: (unclear) Well first of all it means many thanks to the hospi-  
10 tal staff.  
11 S: Oh ok, so you used to be a pretty heavy user?  
12 C: I mean, I drank all the time and for many days.  
13 S: What about at work?  
14 C: No, not a drop.  
15 S: Right, so um, when did you start to cut down?  
16 C: I'd say it was in 1990, but it wasn't really fast enough, it's  
17 only now that it's become more or less reasonable.  
18 S: I see, so what's reasonable today?  
19 C: I try not to drink at all, but it looks like I'll never be able to  
20 do that.  
21 S: Mmm, so when was the last time you had a drink?  
22 C: Yesterday.  
23 S: Yes, when we said hello earlier I thought I spotted a whiff, I  
24 thought about whether or not we should do this interview  
25 at all, but since you're not really drunk, it was just this whiff.  
26 C: That must be because I woke up around two o'clock in the  
27 morning and had a bottle of beer just purely out of thirst.

- 28 S: Hard to believe it was just one bottle, didn't you drink any  
29 more?
- 30 C: Yeah a bit more yeah, of course it leaves its trace but I wasn't  
31 drunk when I came.
- 32 S: Yeah right a bit more, so uhm, how often do you drink nowa-  
33 days, and do you drink to get drunk?
- 34 C: No no, I don't think so, I mean I couldn't afford it.
- 35 S: Once a week, twice a week, every day?
- 36 C: Yeah I'd say once a week, definitely not every day, but I'd  
37 have to say in all honesty, once a week. I have to say.
- 38 S: Yeah, yeah (simultaneously), so what do you use then?
- 39 C: Vodka.
- 40 S: Vodka, you told me earlier that you drank for many days.
- 41 C: Yeah erm.
- 42 S: Right, so do you always get drunk?
- 43 C: No, I mean I don't, I don't get drunk, no well, except for  
44 earlier, not anymore though, well, there's always some of that.  
45 to some extent.
- 46 S: Lets just say
- 47 C: I certainly don't stagger or anything.
- 48 S: Do you have a few beers the next day?
- 49 C: No, I mean, I used to, but not anymore.
- 50 S: Yes, right, you mentioned that you've been caught driving  
51 under the influence before, and that means your blood alco-  
52 hol level was at least one per mille, so I mean, you have to  
53 drink some to get there?
- 54 C: Yeah, that last one, that last one was either during a morn-  
55 ing or evening hangover.
- 56 S: Yeah, so what about the alcohol level, how much was it?
- 57 C: I went over the limit of the police breathaliser, I guess maybe  
58 it was around four.
- 59 S: Yes, I see, um, and this was when?
- 60 C: December fourth.
- 61 S: So, its not that long ago that you drank yourself into that  
62 kind condition.
- 63 C: I can't say myself, I don't even notice if I have a bottle of  
64 vodka, it really doesn't affect me at all
- 65 S: (laughter) Yeah, these kinds of movements, so, have you

66 ever been to any of these substance abuse places,  
67 the A-Clinic?

The pattern of this interview is quite consistent throughout. The social worker picks up elements from the client's responses and uses them to construct further questions concerning the quantity, frequency and type of drinking that he engages in. In our preliminary analysis of this extract we had paid attention to two facts: the definition of the problem and the related turning-points in the interaction. The extract begins with the social worker asking the client about his substance abuse, and with the client answering by referring to his past. Drinking used to be a problem for him, however he now believes that he is "more or less reasonable", despite his doubts of ever attaining complete abstinence. However, the social worker's next question seriously undermines this interpretation of a past problem, as it leads to a series of questions and answers in which the "a bottle of beer" turns into a discussion of an immediately preceding period of heavier drinking, followed by a more general overview of the client's drinking habits. The client denies that he has a tendency to drink to inebriation, although there is one final turning-point in their discussion, as he admits his inability to assess how drunk he gets. Ultimately, the questioning technique leads to the redefinition of the client's past drinking problem as very much a current problem.

We presented these observations to the social workers during our joint discussions, also pointing out that there are several points in the extract at which it would have been possible to take the interpretation in a different direction (i.e. to accept the client's view that he has "come to his senses", to ignore the night-time bottle of beer, to focus on sleeping difficulties, etc.). The social worker who had conducted the interview said that this was in fact the only possible path to pursue. In the interview situation, the social worker had had a very strong feeling that with this particular client, a male in his fifties with three drunken-driving offences on his record, "alcohol could well prove to be the stumbling block". The intuition was based in no small part on the client's appearance and the smell of alcohol on his breath, which meant that it had to be followed up. This idea of 'following up' turns the social worker's interest to the client's drinking history up to and including the present. Thus, the focus of assessment is on both the past and

the present of the client's life.

The questions of the accuracy and reliability of interpretation were considered from two different perspectives in our joint discussions at office x. First of all, it was stressed that the interpretation as to whether or not the client would be suitable for community service had to be as truthful and accurate as possible from the point of view of justice; it was for the court of justice that social workers felt they were doing their job, and they considered it an important partner in their work. Partnership with clients was constructed as a possibility only later, through community service or some other arrangement that would bring them back into contact with the client. Another recurrent theme in our discussions was the accuracy of the assessment in relation to social work's own objectives, which include supporting the client as well as offering concrete social support in order to help the client cope. Accurate diagnoses of the client's condition were necessary in order to provide information on how to target support through social work in the future.

The discussions we had at the two regional probation offices produced *two fundamentally different institutional functions for social work and for the assessment procedure*: one having to do with appropriate knowing and the other with accurate knowing (see Figure 1). Importantly, *these functions were taken for granted*. They had a clear and immediate presence in the social workers' descriptions of the everyday practices of their work. In our joint discussions, these cultures were repeatedly represented as so shared that the only way it was possible to identify their existence was by way of comparison.<sup>9</sup>

## Discourse analysis: local cultures as interview practices

Our frame of interpretation, which made a distinction between the culture of appropriate knowing and the culture of accurate knowing in the suitability assessment procedure (see Figure 1), was thus a product of joint discussions and analyses in which we worked closely with the social workers of the two regional probation offices. These analyses were based on random extracts from the assessment interviews. For

*Figure 1: Local cultures of social work in assessing suitability for community service*

	<b>Culture of accurate knowing</b>	<b>Culture of appropriate knowing</b>
<b>Purpose of assessment interview</b>	To obtain accurate information and produce reliable assessment	To obtain information that supports a favourable report
<b>Compilation of report</b>	Assessment made by probation office and staff	Social workers negotiate with clients about report
<b>The focus in assessment</b>	The past and the present of clients	The present and the future of clients
<b>Direction of co-operation</b>	Justice now, clients later	Clients
<b>Purpose of social work</b>	Provision of social support	Good interaction

this reason, we decided that we should return to the interview material and re-examine it more systematically from the perspective of a discourse analysis. How exactly are these two cultures manifested in the interaction between social workers and clients? Do they appear as prevailing practices, or as small glimpses? Are these cultures as specific to the two regional offices as the joint analysis had led us to believe, or do the work practices of each office contain elements from both cultures? Or is it possible that these cultures are constructs accomplished within the joint discussions themselves, practices that live temporarily within these discussions, but which lack any real links to the actual interviews? Our second round of analysis involved reading the interview material against the frame of interpretation which already identified the two cultures; we would examine how the details of the material would relate and correspond to that frame. However, it is important to stress that we did not read the material against an idea or theory introduced from the outside. This framework was an interpretation that had evolved out of the empirical material throughout the course

of the research process, and we were now proceeding to both elaborate on it and reconsider it.<sup>10</sup>

## *Culture of appropriate knowing in the interviews*

### *Obtaining information in support of favourable reports*

The most significant function of the assessment interview in the culture of appropriate knowing is the construction of information which supports a favourable report, and which ultimately leads to a community service order. In other words, the aim is to produce evidence which is consistent with this objective. There are five different ways of accomplishing this in the interview practices:

*Table 1: Obtaining information that supports a favourable report*

1. Making principle explicit (2)
  2. Picking out appropriate information (4)
  3. Slowing down inappropriate information (1)
  4. Constructing positive information (4)
  5. Reconstructing negative information as positive (4)
  6. Formal or selective use of information from outside sources (6)
- Total 21, y:19, x:2<sup>11</sup>

The most straightforward of these methods is to *make the principle explicit* in the interview situation. It is made perfectly clear to the client that the purpose of the interview is to acquire positive information:

### *Extract 3: Making the principle explicit*

- 1 S: Nothing special there... this data we have on you... (pause,  
2 tapping). This is the paper that you'll be up against in court  
3 with the summary. We're supposed to fill in the basic information  
4 plus anything positive. I mean you don't really have  
5 any sins that should be listed here, but even if you did I  
6 wouldn't really emphasise them, because this is supposed to



- 7            paint a positive picture of you, so the facts are the facts, and  
 8            we're not going to dig up any old...
- 9    C:    Hmm.
- 10   S:    ... ancient museum stuff since that has no real significance  
 11           in the present situation... even if it did in the past.
- 12   C:    Yeah.
- (y 15b, 5)

The social worker is explaining to the client what goes into the assessment report: there is the basic background information and then positive information. The list of the client's past "sins" is the antithesis to this information. The social worker expresses uncertainty as to whether or not the client has actually committed any such sins. On the one hand, she says that there is nothing about the client that "really" must be listed, while on the other hand, she leaves open the question of whether or not there might be something in the client's past that might warrant inclusion. The important thing is that the social worker does not make an issue of inquiring into the past, but on the contrary says that there is no reason for such an inquiry at this juncture. What matters is the present situation, not "ancient museum stuff". Closely related to this, therefore, are the second and third methods of obtaining information that would support a favourable report, i.e. *picking out appropriate information and slowing down inappropriate information*. The former involves an interview method in which the client is asked routine questions about housing, family, substance use, etc., which are not intended to uncover adverse details that might jeopardise the objective of a favourable report. The strategy of slowing down is needed when the client begins to produce accounts of his problems or his failure to keep them in check without being specifically asked to do so. The only example in this material of this kind of slowing down appears in extract 1 (see page 177). It is interesting how the extreme formulation of this culture of appropriate knowing led us not only to the culture of appropriate knowing itself, but also to the culture of accurate knowing.

However, the effort to produce a favourable report involves more than just obtaining appropriate information which has been stripped of all potential problematic aspects. It may also involve the *construction of positive information* in the interview itself.

*Extract 4: Constructing positive information*

- 1 S: Do you have anyone who, who could be there, who could  
2 help you get it done?  
3 C: Well I don't know really.  
4 S: Yeah.  
5 C: I mean, its really up to you.  
6 S: Right.  
7 C: Help...  
8 S: Yeah.  
9 C: ...no one can, manipulate.  
10 S: Yeah, its true that no one can really manipulate. That's  
11 why I'm asking you if...  
12 C: Hmm.  
13 S: ...'cause its up to you, so tell me about yourself, how you're  
14 going to do it (laughter).  
15 C: Hmm.  
16 S: But I mean on the other hand, there are, I mean the people  
17 around you all play a part, its like...  
18 C: Hmm.  
19 S: ...the effect can be either positive or negative.  
(discussion about friends)  
20 S: Is there anyone else we could find, like someone who  
21 could, who could have a positive effect on your  
22 community service working out, you know, like relation-  
23 ships of some kind?  
24 C: Well I'd say my mum's really the only one who could...  
25 S: Yes.  
26 C: ...help me actually go.  
27 S: Yes. So, does your mum know about this trial thing?  
28 C: Yeah she does.  
29 S: Hhm. And your mum lives in Marjola too, does she?  
30 C: Round behind the factory.  
31 S: Yeah hm. So in a sense she could be a person who, could  
32 be there to push you or encourage you or do both?  
33 C: Hhm. Both.  
34 S: Hmm. So, she could maybe...know, know what time you

35            have to be at work, although in the end it really comes  
 36            down to you.  
 (y 20, 18-19)

The social worker is asking the client whether he has anyone close to him who could help him cope with community service. The client is reluctant to mention anyone, arguing on the contrary that it is all down to oneself, to the individual. As far as the client is concerned, helping translates into manipulation; the connotations are quite negative. The social worker latches onto the argument of independence and asks the client to elaborate, but he does not respond. The social worker then attempts to dualise the client's interpretation by noting that the influence of other people can be either positive or negative. The conversation turns to the client's friends, who do not seem provide an answer. The social worker makes one final attempt to construct the necessary human relations resource, and succeeds: the client's mother can provide the necessary support. This completes the task. A positive item of information has been constructed for inclusion in the assessment report. The challenge is even greater if *negative information is reconstructed as positive*<sup>12</sup>:

*Extract 5: Reconstructing negative information as positive*

1     S:    In practice it's really like, I mean, if you have problems, if it  
 2           ends or something, then we can write down that, even if we  
 3           don't officially plan to do so here, I mean, in practice at  
 4           least, if I have a client whose been in bad shape and hasn't  
 5           been able to community service because of that, then he's  
 6           gone to the A-Clinic, so at least there's treatment for the  
 7           substance abuse, so...  
 8     C:    Yeah, so if that's what it looks like, then I'll go there.  
 9     S:    Hhm.  
 10    C:    Right.  
 11    S:    Ok, so I'll make a note that if possible CS. We use CS as an  
 12           abbreviation for community service, so if during that time  
 13           it seems necessary, then you're willing...  
 12    C:    Yes.  
 13           ... to go.  
 (y 25, 16)

This extract is preceded by a discussion concerning substance use, in which it has become evident that the client uses soft drugs and sometimes alcohol very heavily. Both of these findings are problematic with regard to writing a favourable report. However, it is less significant if the client indicates willingness to attend therapy sessions in connection with his community service. Prior to this episode, however, the client has said he would not agree to therapy. In the extract, the social worker acknowledges the client's reluctance, but gets him to agree to have the therapy sessions mentioned in the report. The most important thing at this point is to include this information in the report. The negative item, "possible problem with substance abuse that the client does not want to admit", is thus reconstructed in positive terms as "willing to attend therapy session if necessary".

*The formal or selective use of information from outside sources* means that the client is told that the report will be based on whatever information he reveals during the course of the interview, or, more precisely, on the information jointly constructed by the client and social worker. None of this information will be called into question by comparing it with information from outside sources. The only reason why the client is asked to give his consent for the use of outside information from other authorities is that it is a mandatory part of the interview form, although it is a mere formality. Sometimes the interviewer may ask the client whether he knows of any external sources that might be able to provide favourable information. In other words, the client is told by the social worker that information from external sources is used mainly in cases in which it supports the goal of a favourable report.

### *Social worker negotiates with client about assessment report*

In the interviews, the culture of appropriate knowing is manifested not only in the construction of positive information, but also in the two negotiating parties striking a kind of bargaining relationship. Although it is always the social worker who is in charge of the interview, the client is involved in producing the assessment. This involvement finds expression in the following ways:

Table 2: Social worker negotiates with client about assessment report

1. Preparing report is a joint concern (5)
  2. Social worker reveals what the report will say (5)
  3. Social worker asks the client to approve the text (11)
  4. Social worker formulates text according to client's talk (7)
  5. Statement by Director is a formality (3)
- Total 31, y:21, x:10

*The joint preparation of the assessment report* means, for instance, that during the interview the social worker asks the client: "which of these support measures should we put in here?" (y28, 46), or while taking notes says: "let's put in some of these right here" (y15a, 15). These comments, which are made in the plural (the social worker does not say "which of these should I put in?" or "I'll put in some of these"), involve both parties in the preparation of the assessment. One very concrete example of this is illustrated by a situation in which, during their second meeting, the social worker hands the report to the client and asks whether or not he agrees with its content. In other words, the social worker has typed up the text of the report as part of her job, but the client takes part in the process of preparing the report by expressing his views on its content.

However, the client's role in the culture of appropriate knowing is not reduced simply to 'checking' the final outcome, but he is involved in preparing the report in various ways even during the course of the interview. Another form of client participation is when *the social worker reveals what the report will say*. At the very least, this provides the client the opportunity to comment on the report and voice his opinion about it. This is taken one step further when *the social worker asks the client to approve the text of the report*:

*Extracts 6 and 7: Social worker asks client to approve the text*

- 1 S: Do you recognise the man?
- 2 C: Well I suppose it's all there.
- 3 S: So some of it's pretty close?
- 4 C: Yeah.

5 S: Right good. It's supposed to. The purpose of this form is  
6 still that there's a positive side to our case in court.  
(y 14b, 41)

1 S: (Clatter from typewriter) Am I right if I say that drinking is  
2 confined to days off but is still pretty heavy? That..  
3 C: Uhm...  
4 S: ..you drink during days off but that's all?  
5 C: Uhm yeah. You can say that.  
(y 15a, 23)

The discussions preceding these extracts have covered the set items of the interview form (extract 6) and questions related to the client's alcohol use (extract 7). By asking "Do you recognise the man?" and "Am I right if I say?", the social worker is designating the client as the ultimate expert on these issues. The client himself is the most knowledgeable about these matters, and it is the social worker's responsibility to ensure that the text of the report reads as the client wants it to. In both cases the client accepts the social worker's interpretation. In extract six, the social worker concludes the episode by specifying the function of obtaining and reporting positive information.

Client involvement is strongest of all when *the social worker says that the text of the report will be formulated according to the client's talk:*

*Extracts 8 and 9: Social worker formulates text according to client's talk*

1 S: Yes. So, here I'll write exactly what you told me.  
(y 24, 12)

1 C: ...and the substance abuse situation is probably the best its  
2 been in five years.  
3 S: Yeah right.  
4 C: So I mean really okay.  
5 S: Yes okay. Yeah, I was thinking that we really should include  
that.  
(y 18b, 30-31)

In extract eight the social worker says that the report will repeat what the client says verbatim. The client has been discussing his family situation and arrangements for child care. In the ninth extract the client presents a positive assessment of his substance use, relative to his own standards. The social worker acknowledges that this improvement should be included in the text of the report.

When the client is involved in the assessment process in these different ways, the assessment becomes an issue of negotiation. Client involvement and co-operation in the assessment process loses its meaning if the outcome of the negotiation process is changed after the interview. Indeed, in the culture of appropriate knowing there is a possibility that the social worker informs the client that *the final statement by the Director is a mere formality*.

## *Culture of accurate knowing in the interviews*

### *Obtaining accurate information and producing a reliable assessment*

In the culture of accurate knowing priority is put on acquiring detailed and accurate information on clients in order to reach an accurate and truthful assessment of their suitability for community service. Although the information may never be one hundred per cent accurate and entirely reliable, what is important is to strive for perfection and maximum accuracy. The principle of obtaining accurate information finds expression in the interviews in different ways:

#### *Table 3: Obtaining accurate information and producing a reliable assessment*

1. Making principle explicit (7)
  2. Eliciting of detailed information (11)
  3. Use of multiple information sources (13)
  4. Knowing the client from the past (3)
  5. Finding grounds for overturning negative information (2)
- Total 36, x:33, y:3

In the interviews, the social workers often *make explicit the principle of accuracy*. Extract ten begins with a situation that has been preceded by a

detailed review of the client's previously held jobs. The social worker has been inquiring as to when the client held these jobs, their duration and what type of work they involved. The social worker reports to the client on her inquiries:

*Extract 10: Making principle explicit*

1 S: Yes right. Let's put these figures down so I can remember  
2 them. Yes because the reason I'm so curious about this is  
3 that it has to do with suitability, so I just want to see how  
4 you've handled jobs up until now. What you've agreed on  
5 and how they've gone.

(x 5, 22)

The social worker explains to the client why she is "curious about this": she wants to establish the client's suitability. She is also implying that the only way for her to reach an assessment is to gather accurate information. One of the areas that will impact the final conclusion is the client's job history. The extract begins with the social worker writing down some numbers. This is no coincidence, in that the culture of accurate knowing emphasises the accurate knowledge of quantities (how much does the client drink, how many jobs has he held) and duration (how long has the client lasted in different jobs and relationships) as key indicators of stability. In general, the *eliciting of detailed information* is the most important interview strategy in the culture of accurate knowing. Extract 2, found earlier on in our article, provides an example of this.

In accurate knowing the interview situation is neither the only, nor even the primary source of information. During the course of the interview reference is often made to other sources as well; the social worker will make it clear to the client where necessary *multiple sources of information will be used for making the assessment*.

*Extracts 11 and 12: Use of multiple information sources*

1 S: And another thing is that without your permission I'm not  
2 allowed to ask, to ask anyone to give information about you.  
3 But lets come back to it at the end if it looks like I need to  
4 ask someone something.

(x 13, 9)



- 1 S: Yes. I mean it depends of course on what sort of thing this  
2 is. Do you know whether the complainant's suffered any  
3 major damage?  
4 C: He chipped two teeth, but that was like all.  
5 S: Yes right, okay. (pause) It does say here in the medical report  
6 from the health centre that the kicks to the head were  
7 potentially fatal. So, I mean, there's something to it.  
8 C: Yeah, well they always say that.  
(x 12, 40)

In extract 11 the social worker explains to the client that she must have his consent in order to obtain information from other authorities. It is interesting that in this extract the social worker reserves the right to judge whether or not external sources of information will be necessary. If the interview does not produce the necessary information at the necessary level of accuracy, the social worker will indeed turn to other sources, provided that the client has consented. The client's portrayal of himself counts merely as one source of information among many. The same applies to extract 12, in which the social worker refers to outside information which directly challenges what the client has just said. What is the measure of accurate and reliable information if what the client says conflicts with an official document? These types of discrepancies must be resolved in the culture of accurate knowing, often by referring to additional material.

Social workers do not always meet their clients for the first time in the assessment interview. In many cases they have actually known their clients for quite some time, typically through probation supervision. However, some clients are also known to the social workers through other connections. Information on clients may also be available to social workers through various reports and documents that have been prepared by other probation workers, the police, the public prosecutor, etc. Indeed sometimes social workers justify their somewhat cursory interview technique by saying that they already *know the client well enough*. This suggests that accuracy – asking detailed questions and using multiple information sources – is the norm in the interview situation, and any deviation from that norm must be justified separately.

*Extract 13: Knowing the client from the past*

- 1 S: Yes, so that's basically that, what'll be included in the forms,  
2 the information. So, we can write our report based on this  
3 information, and then on the old supervision information  
4 we have here, 'cause I know you, and 'cause the information  
5 in these forms, which you signed before the start of this  
6 interview, identifies two sources of information that we can  
7 check, one is the welfare office and the other is the police  
8 department, but in your case its more like things from your  
9 youth since I know you...
- 10 C: (grunt)
- 11 S: I mean, obviously in the case of a totally new client we would  
12 call all these places and check things out, but in your case its  
13 probably not necessary, especially since this is an attempted  
14 robbery, and according to criminal law you could get off  
15 with a fine...I
- (x 11/1, 13)

In this extract the social worker is explaining to the client that there is enough information in his file for an assessment, which is why the interview (before the extract) had been short and routine-like. With a new client this would not have been possible. In this case it would seem that the existing information will be supportive of a recommendation for community service. However, prior knowledge of the client may also enter the interview and have a negative impact:

*Extract 14: Finding grounds for overturning negative information*

- 1 S: I mean, like in the minutes of the preliminary investigation,  
2 you can see the whole range of these things, I mean, we  
3 could have a look at this big pile I have here...
- 4 C: Well, there really isn't much to look at when all is said and  
5 done.
- 6 S: No, and I mean this isn't, like I said that this...
- 7 C: Mmm.
- 8 S: in a sense this doesn't really like have anything to do with  
9 our assessment but I mean we could like....

- 10 C: This is just something I'm accused of doing, its never going  
11 to even go, I never even got sentenced for it.
- 12 S: Yes yes.  
13 (Unclear)
- 14 S: We don't even necessarily have to take any position on that  
15 stuff, you know that.  
16 But I mean, there's something to it, one has one and the  
17 other has two.
- 18 C: Mmm.
- 19 S: But I mean I do believe that since you've assured me that  
20 you're capable as far as this community service is concerned  
21 that you can hold your own among friends, I mean that's  
22 okay.
- (x 7, 46-47)

This extract was preceded by a discussion led by the social worker as to whether the client is perhaps too closely involved with his circle of mates. The social worker's interpretation is that this circle may drag the client down and disrupt his way of life to such an extent that he would not be able to cope in community service. The social worker begins by referring to the minutes of the preliminary investigation, which show that the client has often been involved in crimes involving a number of accomplices. On the basis of this information the client's circle of mates is construed as a threat. *Can this negative information be overturned* by reference to just once source, i.e. the client's own assurance, as the social worker suggests at the end of the extract? In the culture of accurate knowing, this is not sufficient. The social worker once again reverts to the same issue at the end of the interview, and also uses outside information in writing her report.

*Assessment is made by probation service and its staff*

In the culture of accurate knowing, the assessment of suitability for community service is in the hands of the probation service and its staff. Clients and other sources are only consulted in order to collect information that is deemed necessary. The processing and analysis of this information in order to reach a decision is not a process in which the client is expected to participate, rather it is solely the job of the

social worker. The fact that the assessment is made by the probation service and its staff is talked into existence in the interviews in two different ways:

*Table 4: Assessment is made by probation service and its staff*

1. Social worker makes statement of exclusive expertise (10)

2. Hierarchic division of labour (9)

Total 19, x:16, y:3

In the interview situation, *the social workers make it clear in a variety of ways that they have exclusive expertise on the matter at hand:*

*Extracts 15, 16 and 17: Social worker makes statement of exclusive expertise*

1 S: So, now I'm just going to ask you these questions and we'll  
2 just check off these boxes. Don't pay any attention to me  
3 scribbling down my notes because afterwards I'll have to  
4 think this over as to what exactly I'm going to write here  
5 when I type it up on the basis of these questions, the  
6 questions in this form and then that eventually becomes the  
7 assessment.

(x 28, 14-15)

1 S: I'll be taking notes for us so it'll be easier, our conversation  
2 will be more fluent, and also 'cause I have to take notes on  
3 so many clients. We, I've always had this method that I write  
4 down important things right away and then write up the  
5 whole final version later.

(x 11b, 17)

1 S: This was all that I wanted to ask you so that uhm, this is, I  
2 mean, I'm going to be honest with you, I really have to give  
3 this careful thought.

(x 7, 65)

In these extracts, the social worker is defining the interview situation as a place for collecting information: "me scribbling down my notes",

“I’ll be taking notes for us”, “this was all that I wanted to ask you”. The social worker’s exclusive expertise is not only achieved because of the fact that she records the information, but because something happens to it after the interview as well: “I’ll have to think this over” and then “write up the whole final version later”; “I really have to give this careful thought”. After the interview, all of the gathered information will be subjected to intense and careful deliberation and processing. In other words, the assessment will not be completed in the interview process. The contents of the assessment are not dictated by the client, nor is he the ultimate expert on the question of suitability; the ultimate experts are the probation service and its staff. The client will not learn in the interview situation whether the report will ultimately be positive or negative, although the social worker may hint at it. For example, in extract 17 the (social worker alludes quite clearly to the report being negative “I really have to give this careful thought”). At the same time, however, the dropping of hints helps social workers retain their exclusive rights on expertise.

The processing of the information after the interview is not only in the hands of the social worker who conducted the interview; there is still one further level in the assessment hierarchy:

*Extract 18: Hierarchic division of labour*

- 1 S: Uhm I now have the information that...  
 2 C: Hmm.  
 3 S: ...I really need here. I’ll write this report and...  
 4 C: Right.  
 5 S: ...and then uhm, then our Director or the Deputy he’ll  
 6 prepare a statement...  
 7 C: Statement  
 8 S: ...for the court of justice...  
 9 C: Yeah.  
 10 S: ...when he reads this report and that is then passed on to the  
 11 court.  
 (x 4, 19)

In extract 18, the social worker explicates *the hierarchic division of labour in the assessment procedure*. The report will be written by the social worker,

and then the Director or the Deputy will study the report, on the basis of which he or she will prepare a statement for the court of justice. Thus the ultimate expertise drifts one step further away. The social worker who has performed the interview cannot know the outcome because the final decision is made elsewhere.

## Conclusions

The assessment of client suitability for community service is a demanding interpretive job. It involves eliciting and collecting information from the client, interpreting and assessing that information and condensing it into a report. The interactive situations in which this job is accomplished often vary quite significantly. In some cases the information obtained is defined as 'scarce', in other cases as 'wrong', and sometimes it is even argued that there is too much information. However, the social worker must always make an interpretation about each particular case and client. The professional core of social work is very strongly located in this interpretive work. That core can defy the boundaries of the job; break free from set forms and set formats of writing reports; escape the expectations of partners and reapply them in various ways. And what is most significant is that the professional core is jointly achieved through a process of negotiation. Social work is an important and powerful element of community service, despite the fact that its administrative role remains quite unambiguous.

Given the presence of bureaucratic rules and various other routines, all assessment interviews have basic structural characteristics in common. Suitability assessment situations also bear a definite resemblance to one another. A close reading of these encounters, however, will reveal tremendous diversity in the assessment practices. In this article we have identified two locally diverse cultures which are shared by a number of social workers in both their common understanding of their jobs as well as in their interview practices. Locality is an outstanding feature of these cultures. If we look at the figures in tables 1 to 4, we can see that the interview practices predominating in office x are representative of one culture, and those favoured in office y are representative of another culture. But we can also see from the same figures that there are 'exceptions' to this main paradigm. As such, it

follows that the practices of the two cultures are not totally bound to certain offices.

All in all, the existence of these local cultures can be considered to reflect the interpretive nature of social work and the opportunities it offers for diversity. The cultures exhibited not only an individual element that varied from one situation to the next, but also habits and customs that were shared among colleagues and collectives. On the basis of this empirical result, we would be inclined to argue that the *persistent tendency in literature of saying that a certain part of social work consists of outward-directed, routine bureaucracy and paperwork is in fact quite far removed from its everyday reality.*

The cultures of appropriate and accurate knowing which we identified in this study are based on different views of the purpose of assessment interview, the compilation of the report, the focus of assessment, the direction of co-operation and the purpose of social work (see Figure 1). In the former culture, the main priority is to reach a positive assessment. Conversely, in the latter culture, the main concept is to construct as accurate an interpretation as possible about the client's suitability for community service through a number of different stages. It is important to stress, however, that *the client's suitability for community service is a construction in both cultures. It is only the type of information produced and used in the assessment that varies.* In the practices of the appropriate knowing, the relevant information is viewed as being derived from the present and the future of the client's life, whereas in the practices of accurate knowing, information concerning the client's past life is considered especially relevant.

When it comes to the direction of co-operation, one culture stresses loyalty to the profession and its clients, the other stresses the task at hand, which means that the most important partner is the court of law. In the culture of appropriate knowing, the most important tool of doing social work is interaction with the client 'here and now'. In the culture of accurate knowing, the social worker will be reaching in the other direction, away from the interaction situation. Social work is thought to be about providing concrete support for the client during his performance of community service. Both cultures regard themselves as justified, although they justify themselves on different grounds. There is no fixed way to evaluate the 'goodness' or 'badness' of either of these cultures. What we do have to remember is that any evaluation

will necessarily be based on a certain set of criteria, and that these criteria are always in themselves open to negotiation and interpretation.

The basic commitments of both of these cultures have certain consequences, most particularly from the client's point of view. The client occupies a different position in different local cultures, and the expectations attached to the client also differ. These differences have to do with skills of interaction. For instance, in one culture the social worker has 'the client's best interest' in mind, which means that the client does not have to form his narration with any great amount of care. In the other culture, however, whatever he says may lead the social worker to conduct further investigations, which in turn may lead to the uncovering of information that may harm his case. Multiple skills are required of the client, although as our analysis shows, it is impossible to know in advance exactly what those skills might be. One of the most important skills is to learn to listen to what the social worker is saying, in that the social worker's narration explicates a large part of the expectations of certain local cultures.

It is possible that the recommendations produced in these two cultures vary greatly from one another. In 1997, the majority of the assessments were favourable and recommended a community service order, although there might be some variety between different offices. However, on the basis of the two cultures of assessment reporting, we conclude that it is impossible for us to say, for example, whether one culture systematically leads to a higher dropout rate than the other. The question as to what follows from these assessments is by no means futile, although statistics alone cannot shed any light on what goes on in the enforcement of community service orders. The results should be monitored empirically and through different stages. How, for instance, is it reflected in the community service workplace that the assessment has considered this option to provide the client with an opportunity? Is there support available so that the client can make the best possible use of this opportunity, and if so, when and how? Is the careful assessment of the offender and his situation reflected in the type of support that is made available to him – is this support properly targeted so that help is available where it is most needed? Are the partners in co-operation always the same, or do they change? Our analysis contained in this work is not broad enough to provide a comprehen-



sive picture of the role of social work and assessments in the community service system. Indeed, no constructionist and ethnomethodological study can aim at such comprehensiveness. As we pointed out in the introduction, the main contribution of this kind of research lies in its uncovering contextual particularities (cf. Riessman 1994, xv). What is needed, therefore, is more empirical research on particularities (such as the different stages and processes of community service) in order to discover how, if at all, the cultures of appropriate and accurate knowing work in other contexts.

It is clear that the position of offenders is different in these two cultures. Similarly, the courts of law that issue community service orders on the basis of suitability assessments are closely dependent on the local cultures within which the assessments have been made. The type of culture in which these assessments are made is clearly a matter of ethical and political importance. In our analysis we have highlighted the significant influence of conversation, as well as the role of minor events in the everyday practice of social work. The local cultures of social work are constructed out of small conversational events, without which they would not exist. If we hope to alter social work in one direction or another, this aspect must be taken seriously. In the everyday practices of social work, old cultures are upheld and new ones are created within the same arenas.

## Notes

- 1 This paper was written as part of a research project on "Institutions of Helping as Everyday Practices", which is funded by the Academy of Finland.
- 2 We call the two regional offices involved x and y for reasons of anonymity. They operate in different cities, but have very similar responsibilities as defined in both legislation and the Probation and After-Care Association's own rules.
- 3 There are many different strands of discourse analysis. Here, we will base our analysis on the ethnomethodological tradition, which is sometimes referred to as discursive psychology (see Potter & Wetherell 1987; Edwards & Potter 1992; Potter 1996; Edwards 1997; Widdicombe 1995.)

- 4 Strictly speaking, our material comprises not only these joint discussions, but also all of the surrounding material which in one way or another has become significant (above all, various kinds of forms, brochures, reports, guidelines, etc., to which the social workers referred in our discussions).
- 5 In the context of our project on “Institutions of Helping as Everyday Practices”, we have also carried out other discourse analyses that are based exclusively on the assessment interviews (Jokinen & Suoninen 1999; Suoninen 1999).
- 6 Among others, Hannele Forsberg (1998) and Jaber Gubrium (1992) have studied local cultures from the perspective of social constructionism and social work. Cultures are made up of the shared assumptions, ideas and vocabularies of members working in the same unit, and of the ways in which they interact with one another. They are shared and standardized frames that are used for purposes of anticipating, analysing and reflecting on activity (Forsberg 1998, 72).
- 7 The number of staff taking part in these discussions varied, but was usually between six and ten. Participation was voluntary, and the meetings involved both social workers who had tape-recorded their meetings with clients and those whose involvement was restricted to joint discussions. Social work students were present at some of these meetings.
- 8 The code at the end of each extract shows the material’s origin. The first letter (x or y) refers to the corresponding regional office at which the interview was conducted. This is followed by the code number of the interview; this may have an a or b attached, indicating whether this was the first or second interview of the same assessment (sometimes the assessment involved one interview, sometimes two). The last digit in the code indicates the page number(s) on which the extract occurs in the transcription.
- 9 In December 1997, a joint seminar for probation staff from both regional offices was arranged, and this idea of two cultures was put to the participants. The response was quite unanimous; this was exactly how the staff themselves viewed the situation. They could easily identify their own units and, at least when they spoke to us, confirmed that this is how they felt the situation should be. In other words, they subscribed to their own local culture, their own distinctive understanding of the institutional function of social work and suitability assessments. The institutional interpretations of probation work recurred consistently from one conversation to the next, from one theme to the next; they were even evident as we were finishing our joint discussions and thanking the staff for their co-operation. At office x, there were comments made even after the meeting had ended regarding the fact that this was a question on which more information should be made available, on which the office itself should do more research. At

office y, the staff thanked us for our contribution and said they had enjoyed our joint conversations. In short, it seems that even the reception of our contribution and the research project as a whole was very different within these two different cultures.

- 10 The question of a third, and possibly a fourth local culture is important here. A third culture was ready to break through at any time. We even had a preliminary name for it: the culture of routine. We would have included in this label such interview practices in which suitability was assessed in very 'simple' terms, by questions concerning housing, employment, substance abuse, etc. In the end, however, this culture of routine never emerged as a separate independent culture, and we opted to allot the elements of this culture to the two other cultures. The element of routine is thus explained through the logic of these two cultures.
- 11 These simple tables (1-4) summarise the findings of our discourse analysis of the interview material. The analysis was based on the frame of interpretation about the distinctive features of the local cultures, which was constructed in the joint discussions we had with the probation offices' social workers (see Figure 1). Specifically, our aim in the analysis was to identify interview practices related to two features, viz. purpose of assessment interview and compilation of report. This exercise produced a somewhat more detailed analysis. The aforementioned features were expressed in the interviews in many different ways, which we have listed in the tables. These different ways of producing certain features of local cultures are variably shorter or longer lived in the interviews, however they are nonetheless clearly identifiable in the turns and extracts. For instance, 'making (the) principle explicit' (Table 1) is usually condensed in one particular turn of the social worker, whereas the 'construction of positive information' (also in Table 1) usually extends over several turns in the process of negotiation between the social worker and client. Specific manifestations of one or the other culture may appear numerous times in the same interview. However, the figures indicated in parentheses refer to the number of different interviews in which each method is expressed. For instance, 'picking out appropriate information' appears in four different interviews. The sum total is divided into two parts according to how often the method in question appears in regional office x, and how often it appears in regional office y.
- 12 The study by Arja Jokinen and Eero Suoninen, found elsewhere in this volume, looks in closer detail at the reconstruction of negative information into positive information in interview situations. They analyse one assessment interview (conducted in two phases) in which an assault offence by a young male client is initially constructed in the client's narrative as an

event that was not his fault, but rather 'caused by others'. However, after the social worker's conversational interventions the act is transformed into an event from which the client learns a great deal, in that it forced him to stop and re-assess his entire life. It is much easier to recommend a self-reflective client for community service than one who 'shies away from his responsibilities'.

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*Arja Jokinen & Eero Suoninen*

## FROM CRIME TO RESOURCE

*Constructing Narratives in a Social Work Encounter*

In this article we will be looking at social work via its everyday practices, and the assumption we make is that it is through these practices that social work is accomplished as what it is.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most important of these everyday practices are those which exist in the encounter between the social worker and the client. This is the focus of our study in the context of this particular work; the social work encounter, which in spite of its importance has only recently begun to attract the attention it deserves in Finnish research.

One way to approach the encounter between the social worker and the client is to look at it as a process geared towards change in the client's life. However, it is extremely difficult to uncover this process by means of scientific research. In this article we will be examining one such process in great detail. On the basis of our analysis we will attempt to show how the narratives that are constructed in the interaction between the social worker and the client, the "stories" about the client's life, can engender the potential for change. The seeds of change lie hidden within the narratives; the power that causes them to shoot forth lies not only in the narratives helping the client to explain and understand what he has done in the past, but also in their opening up different horizons for his agency in the future. Empirically, our analysis is set in the context of social work within the probation office



(probation and after care service). However, we are convinced that the idea of the construction of narratives is applicable to the analysis of social work encounters in general.

## The construction of meanings in interaction

One of the most important tools in the professional encounter is conversation, a process of dialogue aimed at producing an interpretation of the client's situation. The theoretical framework we apply in our attempt to come to grips with this element of interpretation is social constructionism. Social constructionism is concerned first and foremost with language use; the assumption is that oral and written language, speaking and writing, are processes in which social reality is actively shaped (see Gergen 1994; Shotter 1993; Burr 1995). Language use is not studied as a simple mirrored reflection of reality. Rather, the analytical interest centres on how language use itself creates reality, and on how people work together to construct mutual understanding, interpret experiences, and identify and label different things. Social reality cannot be broken down into meanings in a simple and straightforward manner, and there is always the possibility of diverse interpretations. It is for this reason that it is important to focus on those processes of interaction in which meanings are selected, shaped and transformed.

Applied to the study of social work, the ideas of social constructionism imply that linguistic practices are conceptualised as interpretations of social reality and the construction of meanings (see e.g. Jokinen, Juhila & Pösö 1995 and forthcoming; Holstein & Miller 1993 and Miller & Holstein 1991 and 1993; Payne forthcoming). Through a detailed analysis of language use, our intention here is to present an interpretation of those practices of social work in which social workers accomplish their institutional duties, meet their clients and try to help change their lives. Our choice to focus on language use does not mean that we deny the importance of non-linguistic actions in social work. It is important to recognise that practical measures are also related in many different ways to language use. For instance, the way in which an application for income support is processed and the decision reached will depend in large part on how the discussion between the parties involved proceeds (Rostila 1997; Cedersund forthcoming). Similarly, the

establishment or termination of a client relationship in a social welfare organisation is interwoven in various ways with the discussions that social workers conduct amongst themselves or with clients (Jokinen 1995; Juhila 1995; Jokinen & Juhila 1997). Various (involuntary) measures (such as taking an individual into care, or placement in a reformatory school) are always preceded by diverse linguistic processes of definition, and the decisions taken must be legitimised in linguistic terms (Pösö 1993; Heino 1997).

In Finland, recent studies on face-to-face encounters between social workers and clients have applied three different methodological perspectives, all of which are of interest to our orientation here. They are the perspectives of ethnography (Forsberg 1998; Eräsaari 1995), conversation analysis (Rostila 1997) and discourse analysis (Jaatinen 1996; Jokinen 1995). As opposed to viewing social work encounters from the vantage-point of a given "explanatory" theory, all of these approaches share a common interest in everyday work practices, and particularly in how they are perceived and understood by the actors themselves. In ethnographic analysis, the aim is most typically to attempt to identify the interpretation resources employed by actors on the basis of observation materials (Miller 1997). Conversation analysis, for its part, uses detailed transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations to uncover recurring patterns in interaction (Heritage 1997; Hakulinen 1997; Psathas 1995). The method of discourse analysis that we apply in this study shares the same interest as ethnography with regard to how meanings evolve and take shape, although the material consists of transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations as in conversation analysis (Edwards 1997; Jokinen & Juhila 1996; Suoninen 1993 and 1997a; Potter 1997).

Here, the material on which our analysis is based comes from two meetings between a female social worker in the probation office and a young male client of hers. The first meeting lasts about an hour, the second about half an hour. The meetings have been tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, in an attempt to retain all of the nuances that are distinctive of verbal interaction.<sup>2</sup> The case material has been selected from a corpus of ten transcriptions on the basis of its potential to demonstrate how the meaning resources available to the client can be fundamentally transformed in a social work encounter. The main concern in our analysis is the question of what is possible; the prevalence

and frequency of the phenomenon we are examining must be addressed in (further) research that operates with larger data sets.

## The role of narratives in the analysis of meanings

In the process in which individuals reflect upon their pasts (which is often expected of clients in social work), they often do so by constructing “stories” or narratives of past events. Narratives can be approached as interpretative accounts in which meanings are assigned to different events, and in which those events are set out along a temporal dimension. Narratives provide accounts of the causes and consequences of events, highlight the goals and the tensions inherent in different actions, expound the positions of actors, social relationships and contexts (Edwards 1997, 263-270). Our analysis is not based on any particular narrative theory, but we employ the methods of discourse analysis that leans heavily on its primary material. Since our material consists of an actual discussion, and since we are interested in what is produced in that discussion, it is impossible for us to apply any rigid definitions of the term narrative. For us, the narrative is a fairly broad and loose analytical concept which assumes a more specific content both in and through the process of empirical analysis (cf. Edwards 1997, 264-276).

Although narratives provide accounts of past events and experiences, we are not interested in whether the story is true or false; reality does not normally break down into meanings or accounts in any simple, straightforward fashion. It is possible to give many different accounts of the same event, without any one of them being less “real” than another. The key thing we have to realise is that narratives are always real in the sense that they are produced into existence in a specific situation and that they are used to produce certain social consequences (Edwards 1997, 269-270). It can be said then that narratives have different contextual functions, such as justifying one’s own actions, representing someone else’s actions in a dubious light, or emphasising changes that have occurred within oneself. In other words, although narratives must have some point of contact with the past, they are always constructed out of the present. This implies that various contextual factors (such as the institutional context, other discus-

sants or each phase of the discussion) have a major impact on how the past is constructed at each point in time (cf. Middleton & Edwards 1990).

It is interesting (and directly relevant to the case of social work) that narratives not only help to explain and understand past events, but they also open up visions of the future: it is as if they provide clues about a bigger picture than they are explicitly describing.<sup>3</sup> For instance, individual words do not have the same sort of power as words that are grouped into narratives. It is also possible to project oneself into narratives which offer interpretations of one's experiences, particularly when they involve morally loaded roles such as "hero", "victim" or "villain". In this sense, the simple concept of narrative could be replaced by the concept of "lived narratives", a term which Kenneth Gergen (1994, 230) uses to stress the way in which expressions of emotion assume their meaning as parts of different kinds of narratives. Another closely related concept is that of "storied lives" (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992, quoted in Hyvärinen 1998, 329), which refers to the fact that people construct narratives in order to "live them in the future". This potential of narratives has particularly important implications for social work: it offers the possibility of establishing new narratives, which can open up a broader horizon of future prospects that are worth living for (cf. Riikonen & Smith 1997, 13-17; McLeod 1997, 112-113; Gergen & Kaye 1994, 172-175).

In contrast to the line of structuralism which looks at narratives as broad and totally discursive formations, here, we will be examining narratives as locally produced interactive processes. This strategic choice allows us to highlight the key role of interaction in the production of narratives.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, it also means that we will not be looking at social work practices as manifestations of any grand narrative (such as the welfare state or the discipline society narrative) (cf. Hall 1997, 14-16). Rather, our main concern is with how narratives are constructed *in situ*, in the context of human interaction.<sup>5</sup> Also, our analysis of narratives does not apply any given scheme, such as an analyst applying Labov's (1972) classification would do. We feel that any attempt to slot human action into given categories runs the risk of losing sight of the specificity of each particular case (see Edwards 1997, 276; White forthcoming). It is also noteworthy that in the fast-moving train of interaction, narratives are rarely as clearly constructed into clear-cut entities

as in the case of a written text, which means that their interpretation also requires a more sensitive approach (cf. Riessman 1993, 17-18).

The method we use in this study requires that we focus our attention on the details of the interactive episode. The baseline assumption is that not only words, but also other means of communication, such as pauses, tones of voice, false starts, volume, intonation, laughter, crying and hesitation, all play an important part in the construction of meanings and in maintaining communicative interaction (see e.g. Suoninen forthcoming; Silverman 1997, 27).<sup>6</sup> Turns of talk and the shared understanding based on turn-taking are ultimately constructed locally, which means that it is also important to examine how the parties to the conversation receive and interpret the contents of different turns, and also how they react to them at various points during the course of the conversation. Negotiation about meanings is always a joint action involving all the parties to the conversation (cf. Shotter 1993).

## Context and the research problem

Our material was recorded in the following context: A young, 19-year-old male client enters the office of a social worker in the probation office. He will be tried in three weeks' time for an assault in connection with a violent dispute between two groups of youths just over six months ago. The young man has been invited to an interview with the social worker, the purpose of which is to prepare an assessment of the client's suitability to community service for the court.<sup>7</sup> Community service is an alternative to an unconditional custodial sentence, in which the convicted party expiates the offence by unpaid work for good causes. Also, since the client is defined as a young offender, the social worker is required to prepare a personal history report for the court.<sup>8</sup>

The social worker has a structured form for collecting the information she needs for the assessment and for the personal history report. For the assessment of whether or not the client is suitable for community service, data is collected, for example, on his financial situation, social relations, leisure interests, substance use and education. The assessment interview typically involves the social worker asking questions of the client, leading the discussion into areas specified in the form, while she is simultaneously expected to inform the client about

the various aspects of community service. In other words, the conversation uses both the "interview format" and the "information delivery format" (Peräkylä & Silverman 1991 and Silverman 1997, 41-60). The themes covered in the personal history form are very similar, but the accent is more clearly on background data that is relevant to the "determination of appropriate sanctions".

In short then, our case is a situation of institutional interaction in which the two parties meet in order to accomplish certain tasks (see Peräkylä 1997; Drew & Heritage 1992). In this case, the institutional task is to carry out interviews for an assessment report and a personal history report. The institutional context impacts the interaction in another way as well. The two parties do not face each other on equal terms, because the social worker has powers vested in her by the institution to make an assessment as to whether or not the client is a suitable candidate for community service, and to suggest an appropriate sanction to the court. Furthermore, the social worker represents a certain profession within the organisation concerned, and that organisation operates under certain rules of professional ethics, as well as societal and organisational expectations. All of these factors are woven into the interaction, but not in any pre-determined manner because human action is not directly steered by rules. One of the reasons for this is that rules are designed to provide general guidelines, but individual actors have to apply and interpret them separately in each specific situation (Edwards 1997, 5-18). Moreover, different sets of rules may conflict with one another (Suoninen 1997b). In the context of probation work, tensions may be caused, for instance, by the requirement of fitting together the task of punishment and the professional ethics of social work. It is also important to stress that the face-to-face interaction that occurs in the "here and now" constructs a specific, unpredictable event out of each encounter. Despite the fact that the task and themes of the conversation may be provided in advance, it is possible that diverse and even surprising perspectives may appear.

The task for this research is to *analyse the interactive construction of narratives in which the relationship to the criminal offence, to the act for which the offender is charged, is redefined in a new way*. Our interest is focused particularly on how different actor positions, and specifically the client's agency, are constructed in each narrative. This is because the client's agency and related questions about ethics and responsibility can in many ways

be regarded as key issues of social work.

In the early stages of the analysis our strategy is to bracket out as far as possible our preconceptions and to look at the material with an open mind: we want to see beyond what we assume we already know (cf. Silverman 1997, 34). Later on, however, we will link our interpretation to its institutional context, and address questions regarding expertise and the exercise of power in social work on the basis of our analysis. This kind of approach, which leans heavily on its original source material, requires that the report demonstrates to the reader exactly how we have arrived at our conclusions. It is for this reason that our article includes quite extensive extracts from the material.

## Victim narrative

The first of the four narratives we identify in the material begins to unfold at the very beginning of the meeting, which is reproduced in extract one. In these extracts we have used certain codes to try and preserve various nuances of the conversation.<sup>9</sup> S refers to social worker and C to client. To make it easier to follow the conversation, we have written the social worker's turns in italics, the client's turns in normal typeface. Arrows have been inserted on those lines which are the most directly relevant to the analysis.

### *Extract 1: Construction of victim position*

- 1 S: *Yes: so about this community service if it's uhmm there's the, (.) there's*  
 2 *your criminal record*  
 3 C: Mmm.  
 4 S: *Mm (.) .hh So there's one suspended. (3) mm. Erm [erm ne-*  
 5 C: [Yes.  
 6 S: → *uh uh di- did you read the brochure that uhm, (1)*  
 7 C: No.  
 8 S: [*Aha*  
 9 C: → [No. I was so pissed off with this fucking thing that  
 10 th[at when  
 11 S: [*Were you.*  
 12 (.)

- 13 C: Yeah I couldn't be bothered with it.  
14 (.)  
15 S: *Huh.*  
16 C: Well I mean that uhm (1) that originally the the thing was this that, (.) when  
17 I was still in hospital.  
18 S: *Yes.*  
19 C: → That like I mean I'm like the victim in this thing.  
20 (.)  
21 S: [*Yeah.*  
22 C: [Yeah 'cos, (.)  
23 S: *Yea/h.*  
24 C: [And like for me the thing was like this that, (.) I mean, (.) that we they,  
25 (.) first of all we didn't even start the whole fight.

Early on in this episode (on line 6), the social worker asks the client a question that is typical in the opening of an assessment interview. She asks him if he had read the brochure on community service that had been sent to him in the post. However, in this case the question fails to open the usual agenda which would lead to a discussion on the contents of the information package. Rather than entering into a discussion on what he knows about community service or listening to what the social worker has to say, the client sets out to offer a very emotional interpretation of the events that led to his being charged (especially lines 9 and 19). The social worker raises no objection to this change of agenda. Although her response on line 15, an emphatic "Huh", can be interpreted as a mildly critical expression (as if she were saying "why on earth not?"), it still leaves the door open for the client to proceed to the position of a narrator providing an explanation. Following this extract, the discussion goes on to include a long, detailed and emotional review of the events leading up to his being charged with the assault. The social worker clearly assumes the position of listener, intervening only with the occasional solicitation for more specific information.

In the course of this episode (of which extract 1 is only a small part), the client produces himself as a victim of what had happened rather than as a criminal offender. By taking the position of victim the client does not appear as an active agent in the story, but contrarily as a passive object in a string of events which took their own course. The brawl becomes explicated as an event in which the client's own choices were irrelevant, particularly since he was not on the side that started it



all. The “villain” in the story is quite unequivocally the other party in the brawl, those who started it. The structure of alliances is very clearly bipolar; “we” are innocent and “they” are guilty.

The narrative constructed in this episode is clearly initiated and pursued by the client. The client “lives” this narrative very emotionally, and repeats it several times later on in the discussion. The social worker neither lends her support to this narrative nor suppresses it. Instead, she tries on several occasions to shift the focus away from a graphic and detailed account of the events, toward uncovering the motives and causes of what happened. She asks the client: Why did you get involved? What exactly were you thinking? What was the purpose of the whole thing? Eventually, after a whole string of such questions, the client’s black-and-white story begins to crumble, and eventually admits that perhaps he was not “completely innocent” himself. However, at this point there is no serious deliberation of his role in the course of events.

## Realisation narrative

There is a very clear turning-point in the discussion some 15 minutes after the initiation of the interview, when the social worker poses a question which is temporally distant from the event. “This kind of thing” on line 1 refers to the brawl that has been discussed at some length prior to this extract:

### *Extract 2a: From rough experience into resource*

- 1 S: → .hh Well what do you think about this kind of thing that  
 2 six, (.) six months on and ubh, (.)  
 3 C: Well, (.)  
 4 S: About [the whole,  
 5 C: [mhhh ((sniffs)) (.)  
 6 S: [Fracas  
 7 C: → [I don’t know, (.) I feel that like perhaps I needed  
 8 this, (.) system, (.) anyway, (.) I mean what I need is that, (.)  
 9 S: Right.  
 10 C: That I’ve been, (.) I was stabbed and that like stopped me and made me  
 11 think, (.) [like really about these things more

- 12 S: *[Right.*
- 13 C: seriously and uhm, (.)
- 14 S: *Righ-ht.*
- 15 C: So that afterwards, (.) things were going pretty well, (.) six weeks like I  
16 mean I lived at my dad's place and, (.)
- 17 S: *Right.*
- 18 C: I spent a lot of time alone and I did everything went running and  
19 like walking and (.)
- 20 S: *Was that before or af[ter.*
- 21 C: *[After ri[ght after.*
- 22 S: *[Yes [right.*
- 23 C: *[When I was recovering*  
24 *so I couldn't really do anything anyway.*
- 25 S: *Yeah.*
- 26 (.)
- 27 C: And uhm, (.) this was a really good time for me and then when I  
28 went to the army uhm, (.)
- 29 S: *Mm.*
- 30 C: It's been like really a good time for me that,
- 31 S: *Yes right.*
- 32 C: Yeah I mean like, (1) that, (1) it was like on midsummers the last  
33 time like I haven't even been doing dope.
- 34 S: *Yeah.*
- 35 C: Like [that I was, (.) in general like, (.)
- 36 S: *[Okay.*
- 37 S: *Yeah.*
- 38 C: And I've had very little to drink of course 'cos I've been in the  
39 army now, (.) [so I mean last weekend I was
- 40 S: *[Right,*
- 41 C: sober and, (.)
- 42 S: *Ye[a:b.*
- 43 C: *[Now I've been, (.)*  
44 *[like that and I don't know if I'm going to have*
- 45 S: *[Right.*
- 46 C: any this weekend either.
- 47 S: *Yea:b, yea:b.*
- 48 C: So [that,
- 49 S: → *[So what did you like, (.) what did you start thinking,*
- 50 C: Well I suppose I started thinking that anyway because, (.) it's the same  
51 chance it could have been five inches higher then, (.) with  
52 [the knife up here it then



The client weaves this realisation narrative into a broader context of the general development of his life, which he sees as moving in a more positive direction since the event: “I spent a lot of time alone and I did everything went running and like walking”, “I haven’t even been doing dope”, “last weekend I was sober”.

The client proceeds even further with this exercise of self-reflection in the next extract, which follows on directly after extract 2a.

*Extract 2b: Towards a deeper self-understanding*

- 1 S: → *Mm. .hhh Well what in your opinion was the cause of these, (1) brawls then.*  
2 (3)  
3 C: (Like for example,)  
4 S: → *Generally like. (.) .hh, (.) They [come (today and hh,)*  
5 C: [Well, (.) hhh  
6 C: → There’s it’s there are so many that, (.) I mean there’s, (.) many  
7 different reasons. [.mhhh ((sniffs))  
8 S: [Right.  
9 C: At least like erm, (.) I have this that, (.) the reason I like get involved in  
10 these things is that,  
11 S: *Right,*  
12 C: A is this king alcohol.  
13 S: *Rig/ht.*  
14 C: [I’d never ever get involved in this sort of thing sober.  
15 S: *Right. Yes.*  
16 C: Then b, there’s, (.) this sort of (.) feeling of frustration, (.) that  
17 [you’re left with.  
18 S: [Right.  
19 (.)  
20 C: When there’s no real content.  
21 S: *Right.*  
22 C: And then, (.) cor- depression.  
23 S: *Right.*  
24 C: So it’s, (.) it’s like all of them together that they, (.) trigger this thing  
25 that all you need is a small little thing then, (1) it’s like completely,  
26 S: *So it’s a bit like you like to want a [change or.*  
27 C: [Mm. Couldn’t care less. Yeah.  
28 S: *Mm.*  
29 (.)  
30 S: *Yeab.*

- 31 (1)  
 32 S: *So that yeab.*  
 33 (2)  
 34 S: *Mm. mm.*  
 35 (1.5)  
 36 S: → *A bit sort of self-destructive [or [like*  
 37 C: → [Yeah.[that's  
 38 what (.) my behaviour's been like for many years.  
 39 S: *Right[:.*  
 40 C: [I mean really like, (.)  
 41 S: *A-ha.*  
 42 C: I mean, (1.5) right up here all my arms are all, (.) full of scars and  
 43 generally,  
 44 (.)  
 45 S: *Right.*  
 46 C: With cars as well, (.) I've messed around and, (.) had accidents and all  
 47 sorts, (.) I mean it's been like that for many years the behaviour  
 48 that like, (.)  
 49 S: *Right.*  
 50 C: → So it's almost like you know, (.) like wanting to get killed.

The social worker's question on line 1 concerning the reasons for the brawls triggers a sequence from line 6 where the client begins to consider the reasons for his behaviour. Again, the social worker's contribution is not confined to the explicit questions she asks. It is particularly interesting to notice the delicate caution (cf. Suoninen forthcoming) with which she tones down her words so that they are easier for the client to absorb and accept. On line 36, where she offers an interpretation of the client's behaviour, she does not put her views bluntly by saying "so yours has been a form of self-destructive behaviour", rather, they are carefully suggestive for an interpretation: "A bit sort of self-destructive or like". This same kind of caution is also seen on line 26, where the social worker re-formulates the client's description by saying: "So it's a bit like you want a change".

In the exchanges in extracts 2a and 2b, the client is no longer externalising the event (or any other similar events in which he has been involved) as having occurred independently of himself, but he now begins to "live" as an actor. It is not only the actor positions, but also the alliance positions that are changed here. Whereas in the victim narrative the client still strongly identified himself with his mates, in the

realisation narrative the self is no longer located as part of “us”. At the same time, the dichotomy between us and them collapses, and the individual (i.e. the client himself) emerges as a central actor. To simplify, the change implies that “doing well” is closely associated with being alone, whereas the “stupid stuff” is located specifically as part of the actions of the gang. Indeed, this gang is now beginning to take shape as a threat rather than a resource. On the other hand, the event itself is becoming transformed into a resource in the client’s talk; it stopped him, forced him to change direction. This kind of change was inspired most particularly by the social worker’s question at the beginning of extract 2a, which made it possible for the client to assess what had happened without any threat of losing face. He was able to do this by locating his mistakes as part of the past (or his “past self”), which he was then able to analyse from a distance, without posing any threat to his current self. The critical evaluation of the “past self”, viewed in contrast with the “changed self”, actually provides useful tools for the construction of a new, positive kind of agency (cf. Juhila 1994). In other words, the impetus for the narrative was provided by the social worker, and during the course of the discussion the social worker gave strong support to its development through encouraging responses, and through soliciting further information.

## Peace-builder narrative

During the first meeting, the client still produces one narrative which further reinforces his agency. This narrative is also initially prompted by a question asked by the social worker.

### *Extract 3: Imaginary but concrete peace-building*

- 1 S: → .hh Well what would happen if you had, (.) a similar situation.
- 2 (.)
- 3 S: → Today again and then you like, .hhh uhm with these mates of yours in
- 4 this bar you’d come out and then uhm, (.) what happens is that, (.)
- 5 Nikeo, (.) he asks for a lift ask or ((two previous words whispered)) asks
- 6 for a lift and then he, (.) he jumps, (.) out (.)
- 7 C: → I suppose I’d got over and calm things down I think that, (.) that,

- 8 (.) when like this thing when it happened, (.) I'm sure that's what I  
 9 wanted to do. 'Cos I had some sort of like, (.) some sort of, (.) li- hh  
 10 anyway this, (.)  
 11 S: *Mm.*  
 12 C: Make and, (.)  
 13 S: *Mm.*  
 14 (.)  
 15 C: Make and Niko they, (.) they're like in Turku they're in like a pretty to-, (.)  
 16 I mean like tough, (.)  
 17 S: *Right.*  
 18 C: Gang and I've now been, (.) living elsewhere I've like, (.) a bit  
 19 had less to do with them and [now I haven't really had anything to  
 20 S: *[Yeab,*  
 21 C: do with them, (.) since I've been in the army I haven't even seen Niko.  
 22 S: *Yeab right.*  
 23 C: And uhm, (.) I suppose there's sort of a kind of wanting to show  
 24 off that I don't, (.)  
 25 S: *Ye[ab.*  
 26 C: [That's Pave he's still real sharp, (.)  
 27 S: *Right.*  
 28 C: That like he [hasn't,  
 29 S: *[Yeab to them [right Ma[ke and Niko right.*  
 30 C: *[Yeah right, [Right.*  
 31 C: Yeah so that like, (.) [I just couldn't  
 32 S: *[ ( )*  
 33 C: go in there, (.) and stop it even if I'd wanted to like stop this  
 34 unnecessary, (.)  
 35 S: *Mm. Be[cause you're quite a bit bigger than [these*  
 36 C: *[ ( ) [Right*  
 37 S: *Two other lads that,*  
 38 C: *Mm.*  
 39 S: *Mm.*  
 40 (1)  
 41 S: → *I mean you could probably just with your presence, (.) even calm them, (.)*  
 42 C: *Ye[ah.*  
 43 S: *[Like these situations, (.) mm.*  
 44 C: → *I mean it could have been done different, (.) I mean I'm sure like I know*  
 45 *that, (.) that that like in this situation even though I like, (.) I was*  
 46 *there in the end I st-, (.) well I don't know whether it would any*  
 47 *more at that stage but at the point where there were two of them*  
 48 *and three of us in the beginning, (.)*

- 49 S: *Right*  
 50 C: → I could have- if I'd done the right thing the whole, (.) thing could  
 51 have, (.) been avoided. (.)  
 52 S: → *So [how,*  
 53 C: [I mean I believe I could have avoided them, (.)  
 54 S: → *What would you have [done.*  
 55 C: [Well I mean fuck I would have like gr-, (.) like  
 56 grabbed hold of Make or Ni[ko and said  
 57 S: [Mm. .hhh  
 58 C: hey we're off now that, (.) this we're leaving this fucking this right  
 59 here.  
 60 S: *Yeab [right,*  
 61 C: [That I'm sure it would have worked like that.

In a sense, this episode brings the previous conversation to full circle, reverting to the lesson that was to be learned from the story. Simultaneously, however, the episode also produces new, more concrete interpretations of how one is expected to behave in these kinds of situations. Therefore, we deal with this perspective as a separate narrative.

The social worker opens the episode by asking on line 1 what the client would now do if he were in the same situation. However, the question does not elicit an immediate response, and therefore on lines 3-6 the social worker proceeds to portray a concrete scene which corresponds to the brawl in which the client had been involved. This helps the client to project himself into the situation, through which he begins to construct a new kind of active self. Whereas in the victim narrative the client assured that he had no options but he was forced into doing what he did, this time he constructs his position in completely different terms: this time his own actions have a decisive impact on the course of events. Having initially constructed a model of imaginary action, the client eventually (on lines 50-51) draws a new conclusion about the previous, controversial events: "If I'd done the right thing the whole thing could have been avoided".

As in the previous narrative, the social worker successfully invites the client to reinforce and concretise the peace-builder narrative (on lines 52 and 54) by prompting further information: "So how?" and "What would you have done?". These direct questions have now become possible because the conversational environment has changed;



such questions no longer threaten the client's face. A major factor in this change of atmosphere is that the social worker has previously (on lines 35 and 41) stressed how the client's very presence would serve to calm things down, an assessment that the client has accepted.

In his responses, the client constructs his role and position as an actor most specifically in relation to his own mates: he would quite simply intervene and get the situation under control by appealing to his mates. Here, his hero role is constructed in terms of peace-building, not in terms of macho arrogance. At the same time, the client reflects upon his relationship to his own gang. This reflection lends further support to the interpretation formulated in the previous narrative, in which the gang was no longer necessarily an ally but rather a threat. In fact, the client says he would have wanted to act differently the last time round and stop all these things, but was not able to do so. Now, the social worker and the client are constructing a self for the client that would be capable of acting differently. The relationship to the events which have landed the client in trouble is thus reconstructed again: if only he had done the right thing the whole incident could have been avoided.

## Narrative of juridical game

The client and social worker meet a second time approximately a fortnight later. The client arrives directly from a meeting with his lawyer, in which they have been discussing the trial. The meeting with the social worker begins as follows:

### *Extract 4: Juridical "value revolution"*

- 1 S:      *Yeab, (.) ubm, (.) bb you get round to go and see, (.)*  
 2 C:      The law[yer.  
 3 S:                 *[The law]yers.*  
 4 C:                         [Yeah.  
 5 C:      So [(that's)  
 6 S:                 *[Yeab.*  
 7 C:      So that's (now) in a good shape, (.) [(this)  
 8 S:   *[I see.*

- 9 C: these things.  
 10 (.)  
 11 S: *So wha:t, what [did,*  
 12 C: → [I denied them [charges both of them.  
 13 S: [be say.  
 14 (.)  
 15 S: *A-ha.*  
 16 C: But uhm, (.) there's this, (.) the one I had a swing at he, (.)  
 17 [he hasn't even pressed charges.  
 18 S: [*Right,*  
 19 (.)  
 20 S: *Right[;*  
 21 C: [So he's. (.) he's one of the witnesses.  
 22 S: *Right.*  
 23 C: So that, (.) uhm two, (1) I didn't like confess, and then no one  
 24 there's no witness statements it doesn't say anywhere that this bloke  
 25 with the knife, (.) that I would have hit him at any stage, (1) it's  
 26 uhm, (.) the statement says that, (.) I held him by the lapels.  
 27 S: *Ri[ght.*  
 28 C: [But that's, (.) that's before he knifed me.  
 29 C: That (he's) [( ) (even) knifed me.  
 30 S: [*Right.*  
 31 C: → It doesn't fulfill, (.)  
 32 S: *A-h[a.*  
 33 C: [the elements of assault and, (1) so there's no other evidence  
 34 and uhm, (.)  
 35 S: *Right,*  
 36 C: Then, (.) they say that I would have, (.) smashed in the face of this  
 37 (.) rasta guy and, (.) shoved him into this, (.) roadworks pit and, (.)  
 38 the statement says that, (1) this Koskela someone, (.) a witness on  
 39 their side says that, .hhh I did it after I was stabbed.  
 40 (1.5)  
 41 C: And first of all I [couldn't have done that afterwards anyway.  
 42 S: [*Right,*

In this exchange the client's relationship to the crime is explained in a fundamentally different way than at the end of the previous meeting. Inspired by the conversation he has just had with the lawyer, the client is now looking back at what had happened from the angle of the "juridical game". The most important questions now are, what should he confess to, what exactly can he be charged for, and is there any

evidence against him. In the narrative of the juridical game, the hero is not he who critically weighs his moral values and actions, but he who knows how to play his cards right so that the sentence he receives is as lenient as possible. With the client's role and position as an actor defined from the point of view of the juridical game, the party who emerges as a natural ally for the client is his lawyer.

It is interesting to see how the social worker responds to this narrative; she allows the client to tell her the "news" without making any explicit comments.<sup>10</sup> As the discussion continues (outside the extract), she concentrates entirely on the practical sides of the legal process. At this stage she is still very careful not to take a firm stand on the moral dimensions of the issue.

## Reproduction and reinforcement of the realisation narrative

As we were listening to the tapes for the first time, we wondered how, if at all, the social worker would deal with the contradictions between the different narratives. The line that the social worker decides to pursue crystallises what we believe are key aspects of social work. The turning-point in the conversation comes in the following extract:

### *Extract 5: Back to familiar values*

- 1 S: *bhh And and, (.) uh .hh and here we'll have I was, (.) I like errr started hh,*  
2 *(1.5) to think about the repo- we'll have the personal history report as an*  
3 *appendix and then uhm .hh I like thought that u:hh, (.) I think what we could*  
4 *say is this that uhm like what you said that, .hh that this what happened*  
5 → *(.) .hh was like (.) that it was sort of stopped you and made you realise.*  
6 *(.)*  
7 S: *For you this, (.)*  
8 C: M[m.  
9 S: *[In general this thing in Ma-March that [you had to*  
10 C: *[Mm.*  
11 S: → *that it like forced you to, (.) stop.*  
12 *(.)*  
13 C: Mm[:.  
14 S: → *[Like when you were convalescing, (1) you you had to think things*



However, the client does not immediately drop the narrative of the juridical game and revert back to the realisation narrative, so the social worker begins to reconstruct the narrative one piece at a time. The social worker proceeds through the next steps in a rather tentative fashion, yet heads very systematically in the direction she has chosen: “that it like forced you to stop” (line 11), “you had to think things over and you started to think about it” (lines 14-18), the army made possible a “change of direction” (line 23) and was “clearly different” (line 24), “good for your self-confidence” (line 39). The interpretations begin with externalising explanations and move towards action based and personal ones.

It is also interesting to see how the client’s responses begin to change. On line 6, where one might expect the first response, there is nothing but a pause. At the next stage (on lines 8 and 13), the client’s responses are still at a bare minimum (“mm”). Finally, in the third stage, he joins the social worker as “co-producer” of the narrative (lines 22, 26, 28, 30, 32), and eventually on line 40 confirms the social worker’s interpretation that his self-confidence has been strengthened. The client was eventually persuaded to begin co-producing the narrative through the point at which the past was viewed from the perspective of positive developments.

## From crime to resource: summary of the conversation process

The conversational process and the construction of narratives over the course of the two meetings between the social worker and the client can be summarised as follows. During the first meeting, the conversation shifted gradually from a victim narrative (initiated and emotionally constructed by the client) towards a realisation narrative, and finally toward a peace-builder narrative. From very early on the social worker applied delicate conversational means to convey to the client that the victim narrative is not an adequate means of explaining the events which led up to the criminal charges. The force that is concealed in the tones of the reception of the client’s talk is clearly visible when we compare the reception of the victim narrative and the

realisation narrative. As soon as the client imported elements of the realisation narrative, and later of the peace-builder narrative, into the conversation, the social worker assumed the position of enthusiastic listener and inquirer, acting also to some extent as verbal co-producer. Both the discussant's tone of voice and the way in which emotional states are conveyed play a crucial role in this type of encouragement. The peace-builder narrative, which supports and complements the realisation narrative, was thus actively inspired and supported by the social worker. In fact, the realisation narrative initially emerged as an alternative to the victim narrative, in response to a question asked by the social worker, with both parties beginning to jointly produce an answer. The same holds true for the peace-builder narrative, which began to unfold through responses to questions pursued by the social worker.

At the conclusion of the initial meeting, the shared interpretation of the event was that it had, after all, been a useful lesson. It had forced the client to stop and think about things, about his own behaviour and responsibility for what had happened. What this ultimately meant is that the client had been forced to take a long, serious look at himself, and to attempt to find new directions for his future. If we assume that the position of victim locks the actor and his responsibility into one place, the transition to the realisation narrative, and further to the peace-builder narrative, can be viewed as opening up new horizons for action. In this sense, it can be said that *the process transformed the crime into a resource*.

Social relations are also constructed very differently in these three narratives. In the realisation narrative, the client's best allies are no longer his mates, but rather staff and friends in the army or even social workers, although the latter are not explicitly mentioned. Especially in the peace-builder narrative the client's mates are transformed from allies into the root causes of the problem. Whereas in the victim narrative it is heroic to defend one's mates even quite forcefully, it now begins to seem justified to defend oneself against their foolishness. This is done both by means of withdrawal (staying away from one's mates) and by building up a new actor-self in relation to other gang members (e.g. intervening to calm things down and avoiding fights; see Appendix).

The second meeting began with the client providing a very different account of the events that had taken place. In this case the most im-

portant aspect is no longer learning lessons or contemplating a change of direction, but rather playing the juridical game with a view to getting as lenient a sentence as possible. The social worker took a very practical attitude towards this narrative, making no attempt to silence the client, but simply accepting the information that he provided about his conversations with the lawyer and his decision to deny the charges. The social worker refrained from commenting on matters beyond her jurisdiction, i.e. the strategy that the lawyer and client had decided upon, and took for granted that the playing of the juridical game involves its own rules. Besides, as far as the client's future is concerned it is obviously in the best interests of social work (and the social worker) as well that he can avoid a prison sentence or get off with as lenient a sentence as possible. However, the key matter as far as social work is concerned is that the client has learned his lesson, and that he will attempt to change his behaviour in the future, thus avoiding involvement in such predicaments. Therefore, inquiring about the client's responsibility (and guilt) can be seen as a primarily pedagogic exercise. In this sense, it can be said that justice and social work are differently oriented. In social work we tend to delve into the past for reasons having to do with the future, whereas, as far as justice is concerned, delving into the past is primarily an exercise of finding out "what really happened" and of establishing juridical responsibility (cf. Potter 1996, 193-194). Indeed from the point of view of social work it is interesting that the meeting did not end in the two parties practising their strategy for the court hearing, but the social worker reverted (in a very subtle way) to the explanation that was based on the realisation narrative and eventually got the client to join in its production.

## Discussion

Social work is essentially about changing things; the people involved in social work situations are usually there because they want to create change. In the context of probation work, we have to start out with the same assumption: that the aim is to change the client's way of life and to help him steer clear of trouble. Social workers can try to accomplish this in various ways. One of the tools they have at their disposal is conversation, which typically involves the construction of diverse

interpretations of the client's life.

If we accept that narratives play a crucial part in both the construction of agency and in the justification of different actions, then the kind of narratives the clients of probation offices "live" is inherently relevant. Narratives which the client lives very emotionally can be used to justify (either to oneself or to others) a particular act. For instance, harming another person may be justified as part of a narrative in which the offender is either located in the position of an innocent victim or a hero defending his mates. Changes in narratives may therefore contain seeds of way-of-life changes. Although these seeds do not shoot forth by themselves, outside the realm of professional encounters, we contend that the kind of hero roles we are capable of living in our imagination have a much more profound impact on everyday exertions than we may be inclined to think. In the present case, for instance, the alternatives presented to the victim narrative emerged in the discussion through the joint effort of both parties and with such force that it is reasonable to assume that the client will have continued use for them as symbolic resources in his everyday life.

Since there are very few arenas in which people can fit themselves into *new kinds of hero roles*, professional encounters in social work (similarly to therapy sessions) can be immensely important for the generation of new kinds of narrative resources (cf. McLeod 1997; Gergen & Kaye 1994; Riikonen & Smith 1997; White & Epston 1990). This is particularly true in the case of a young client standing at a cross-roads in his life. Social work encounters, even when they have no other formal purpose than to collect information for an assessment report, may thus play a significant part in the generation of new, valuable voices.<sup>11</sup>

We promised earlier that we would discuss the implications of our analysis with regard to three themes that are directly relevant to social work: institutional context, expertise and the exercise of power. First, a few words on the institutional context. An examination of our conversation process will show that the people involved are accomplishing a certain institutional task (conducting an interview for an assessment and a personal history report) within a certain institutional context (probation/social work). The social worker makes explicit reference to this task, which implies that both parties are aware of the purpose of the meeting. Another indication of the institutional task is that the social worker uses a form with a list of themes that she is



supposed to cover in the interview. She also provides the client with information regarding community service.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, it is equally justified to argue that the conversation process was very much constructed in terms of “here-and-now” interaction. The social worker opened the conversation from the horizon of the institutional task by asking whether the client had read the brochure he had been sent about community service. This question usually paves the way for a transition to information delivery, which some social workers accomplish within the interview format and others within the information delivery format. In this case, however, the conversation immediately headed in an exceptional direction, as the client “refused” to participate in this agenda. Instead, he set out to provide an emotional account of the sequence of events which had led to his being charged. It is interesting that the social worker agreed to this change of agenda.<sup>13</sup> She did not attempt to force the conversation back onto its standard track, but began to construct an alternative narrative by using elements from the client’s own account and by getting the client himself to participate as co-producer. This narrative allowed for deliberation from a new and different angle both as to what had happened and why the client had behaved as he had. In a sense, one might suggest that the social worker did more in this meeting than her institutional duties, strictly speaking, entailed.<sup>14</sup>

It is our contention that the special expertise of the social worker lies in large part in the way she constructs a conversational relationship with the client, in how at certain points of the discussion she opens conversational space for the client and at others steers the discussion into new directions. It is extremely difficult to explicate this professional competence, however, because encounters always consist in flows of interaction in which (at least) two parties are involved in an unfolding process of building up a shared miniature culture. For this reason it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to provide any universal guidelines for conversational encounters.<sup>15</sup>

The context and professional expertise of social work was also reflected in the kind of meanings that the social worker favoured, opened or closed in the conversation. For instance, at the beginning of the conversation when the young male client began to produce a detailed and graphic account of the brawl, the client and the social worker took up different positions for different functions. For the young client, the

function of looking back at past events was to assure the listener of his innocence, whereas the social worker was attempting to instil a stronger sense of responsibility in the client (cf. Edwards 1997, 283). In this case the voices of change were clearly interwoven with the ethics of social work, with conceptions of right and wrong, of desirable and avoidable future developments. Indeed the same process can be examined not only as an example of the social worker's professional competence, but also as an example of the exercise of power which produces subjects (Foucault 1981 and 1982) and which is delicately interwoven in the conversational process (see also Jokinen 1995). However, power can be present in these encounters in many different ways, and we do not necessarily have to look at the exercise of power in terms of being either good or bad. It is more important to consider what power produces in each specific situation and in each network of relations.

# Appendix 1

Figure 1: Construction of agency, alliances and crime in different narratives

	<i>agency</i>	<i>alliances (ally/enemy)</i>	<i>relationship to crime</i>	<i>tension in story</i>
<i>victim narrative</i>	passive drifter	own gang/ the other gang	self victim of events (could not have done otherwise)	struggle between us innocent and them guilty
<i>realisation narrative</i>	thinking and developing self	current self/ past self	useful exper- ience and lesson	struggle between current develop- ing self and past "blunderer"
<i>peace-builder narrative</i>	active agent	me/ own gang	could have/ can be pre- vented by doing right thing	struggle between me and other members of own gang
<i>narrative of juridical game</i>	skilful player of game	me+lawyer/ court+ witnesses	crime as legal concept (evidence will decide)	struggle between my own and witnesses' accounts

## Notes

- 1 Our study forms part of a three-year (1997-1999) research project on "Institutions of Helping as Everyday Practices", financed by the Academy of Finland. We wish to thank all of our colleagues who were involved in this project for their help and support with this paper: Tarja Pösö, Kirsi Juhila, Jarl Wahlström, Katja Kurri and Timo Vottonen. Thanks also to Mirja Satka, Anssi Peräkylä, Johanna Ruusuvoori and Tapio Kuure for their useful comments.

- 2 Spoken and written language differ from each other in many respects: Spoken language tends to be less coherent than written text, and is often ungrammatical and superfluous etc. For these reasons it may seem extremely tedious to plough through detailed transcriptions of spoken interaction. However, we did not want to make either the analyst's or the reader's job too easy by excluding all of these complex elements, because we feel that they are directly relevant to our analysis (cf. Silverman 1997, 26-27, Cameron 1996, 257-258).
- 3 The emphasis on narration does not imply that we assume that all conversation between the social worker and client is narrative. Nonetheless, the points in the discussion in which the parties involved do construct a narrative are particularly relevant to our analysis.
- 4 Derek Edwards notes that narrative analysis can have three different functions: 1) narratives can be analysed in relation to the events that they describe (pictures of events); 2) the main interest is with how people understand those events (pictures of mind); and 3) the analysis can start from the action (conversation) within which the narratives are produced. This means that the focus is on discursive action. (Edwards 1997, 271-272) This is precisely what we are interested in within the context of this paper.
- 5 According to Edwards, narrative research has been largely based on cognitive psychology and literary narratology, which have aimed at producing generalisable categorisations and typologies of narrative structures. Consequently, less attention has been paid to how "specific story content, produced on and for occasions of talk, may perform social actions in-the-telling". (Edwards 1997, 266)
- 6 Videotapes would obviously have been useful for the analysis of aspects of non-verbal communication nuances, but this option was not available to us. However, since our main analytical interest is not with such details of interaction, but rather with the construction of meanings in the train of interaction, we feel that the audio material we have collected provides a sufficiently solid base for our analysis.
- 7 If it is the prosecutor's view that the maximum sentence for the offence in question cannot be in excess of eight months of unconditional imprisonment, he or she may request that an assessment is conducted to determine the suitability of the offender to community service.
- 8 Depending on the type of crime the age limit is 19-21 years.
- 9 Special symbols used in the extracts:

<u>          </u>	emphasis
(1)	duration of pause in seconds
(.)	pause no longer than half a second
[	overlapping utterance begins

- . falling intonation
- , steady or rising intonation
- : extended or prolonged sound

The names of places and people have been changed for anonymity.

- 10 However, the pauses on lines 14 and 41 can be read as a critical reaction, which is indeed how the client seems to interpret them, at least via the “but” on line 16.
- 11 It is not uncommon to hear people say that there is no point in trying to talk sense into young offenders. We beg to differ, however. It is quite possible that an encounter between a social worker and a client can lead to a relationship in which talking can make a difference. People’s lives are composed of countless strands, and although one single strand does not in itself hold a significant amount of weight, it can be immensely important and valuable to the individual. For one person this strand might be a meeting with a social worker, for another it might be a job in a youth workshop repairing bikes and cars. It can be characterised as providing an opportunity to construct new actor positions and hero roles.
- 12 Since our concern in this article is with the transformation of narratives, the extracts shed very little light on the treatment of different themes in the discussion or on information delivery.
- 13 Taking up the position of narrator may be one such means with which the client can make his voice heard. In her analyses of consultations between doctors and patients, Johanna Ruusuvoori (forthcoming) has found that the way in which patients can occupy the arena, at least for a while, is to construct an account in narrative format in response to the doctor’s question of what is troubling them.
- 14 The frame of social work/probation work, or more specifically, the recognition (or valuation) of the institutional function of community service interviews is not, however, singular and uniform, as Kirsi Juhila and Tarja Pösö have shown elsewhere in this book.
- 15 For example, in another client encounter in which the social worker used very similar questions to try and get another young male client to contemplate his actions and future, the young man refused to respond to the social worker’s initiatives.

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## RESEARCHING DIFFICULT SITUATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK

*Morality and Politics of Expert Work*

### My research motivation

My article is based on the data of my doctoral dissertation project, my manuscript and research journal, as well as on papers and Finnish publications in which I have dealt with the subject matter. The starting point of my study is the situation in social work and team work in the practice of health care in which conflicts most often arise, and in which the professionals are short of means. I have studied the multiprofessional assessment in health care of the situations and working capacity of people who have fallen in between the cracks of working life and the pension system. More specifically, I have studied the relationship between the established practices of the social insurance system and people's experiences, as well as the work being done on that relationship in the multiprofessional assessment of health care.

When speaking about a study that is so closely connected with the national practices used in the assessment of working capacity, as well as with the functioning of national social insurance systems, a problem arises: How is it possible for the reader to understand my study

without possessing knowledge of these systems? I have tried to solve this problem, on the one hand, by locating my study in the context of the Finnish system, and on the other hand, by discussing the relationship between people's experiences and the practices of the system on such a general level that the phenomenon is also recognisable outside of the Finnish context. However, I would like to remind the reader of one of the features typical to the Finnish social insurance system and its broad coverage. We have in Finland become quite accustomed to the conception that, in our welfare state, social insurance covers risks due to illness or loss of working capacity. The citizens have internalised this promise of the welfare state, and the laws which afford it are still in force. The problem of falling in between systems must be examined against this background.

I have examined problematic benefit denial cases and their re-adoption in gatekeeper organisations. I have searched for my research subjects amongst those clients who utilise health care services because they consider themselves unable to return to their previous jobs due to a loss of working capacity, but whose pension applications have been rejected. The focus of the study is on a point which is quite interesting with regard to the implementation of social policy, in that it involves a clear tension between the various societal subsystems. At the same time, the study illuminates the social control of impaired capacity for work at the level of professional practices, and visualises the position and clienthood of those who have fallen in between the cracks of working life and the pension systems.

The cases I have included in my study of those whose pension applications were rejected are naturally only representative of a minority of the total number of pension denials. However, this does not present a problem in a qualitative study, which aims not at statistical generalisations, but rather at creating a picture and developing a theory about the connections within the studied material. Not all of those who lose their capacity to work end up faring poorly, but in my view, both social work and social work research have an obligation to visualise those processes in which the end result is negative.

The motivation for my post-graduate studies and research arose out of the numerous obscure, interesting, inconsistent and contradictory cases and unanswered questions that I had encountered as a social

worker in the field of health care. I wanted to sit down and muse on what I had swallowed. A great deal of motivation also came from the fact that there was so much that had remained 'half understood' over the years, but which had not been brought out into the open and discussed. I did not have enough concepts at my disposal from outside the medical paradigm to analyse the social and psycho-social problems opening up before me. I did not have enough conceptual tools suitable for the professional perspective of social work to be able to justify my perspective to others in a 'foreign framework'. I often found myself at a loss for words when attempting to formulate the questions that arose in my mind. I came to realise that in definition disputes and assessment discussions, they who have not mastered the concepts of their perspective are easily on the losing side. In addition, it is difficult for us, both as employees and clients of health care, to accept situations in which institutional logic, the established practices of the systems, ignore people's own experiences. I wanted to give voice to these experiences. To me, experience-based knowledge is fundamental in social work, whether acquired by the client or by the social worker.

My research process has thus involved the conceptualisation through my research data of the complexities I have experienced in professional social work, which have been occupying my mind. In other words, I have sought to better understand what I previously understood only in part. In this respect, my research data can also be seen as a theoretical sampling of the data in order to study the questions that have arisen in my earlier professional work. I have studied the assessment of complex situations at a place where a multiprofessional team of experts attempt to analyse and organise the inconsistencies and contradictions in order to find solutions. In this way it is possible to better understand the perspectives and experiences of the individuals acting in these situations, to understand the conditions for the co-ordination of these various perspectives. When talking about 'acting people', I am referring to all of the individuals who were present in the situations I studied: experts, various officials as well as clients.

## Research subject: The multiprofessional handling of the cases of those who have fallen between working life and the pension system

The study can also be examined in connection with research on the situation of the socially deprived. In this case, we are dealing with research which focuses on the process of becoming socially deprived, as well as research on the related helping practices of social work in health care. On the other hand, we are also dealing with research on the gaps in social security, residual social policy and social work. Those who end up outside the sphere of working life generally tend to lack power or advocates in society. At worst, the process of social exclusion leaves the individual with hardly any freedom of choice with regard to his or her working life. It might well be that the only choice left to many disabled and ageing unemployed persons surrounds his or her status following the exclusion process: whether to be unemployed, take a disability pension or remain totally outside the sphere of social security. And even then, the power of definition is in the hands of the administrative organisation as opposed to being up to the individual. The right to respected existence, to human dignity, is also a central theme in examining the clienthood of a person who has fallen between the cracks of the systems.

Those whose applications are denied tend to appear in studies and statistics as numbers or, at best, as cases with various attributes attached to them; for example: 'a person with multiple problems' or 'a poorly diagnosable case' (Munter et al. 1984, 140). Or a comparison is made, stating for example that a pension denial is 'more common among the young than it is among the old', 'more common among women than among men', 'more common among those who have made the application on their own initiative than among those who have done so at their doctors' suggestion', 'more common among those with many illnesses than among those with only one' (Gould 1985, 197). The functioning of the social insurance system has yet to be examined from the perspective of the citizen whose application has been rejected.

An interesting special feature in the incidence of pension denials is the systematic difference between the cases of men and women. When making comparisons on the basis of 1970-1990 statistics, we can note

that the share of rejected disability pension applications among women has been 1.3-1.7 times greater than among men (Gould et al. 1993). We can conclude that the results reflect both the ways in which society works as well as the variations connected with gender roles. Here, the former includes the work of institutions responsible for assessment, their benefit award decision practices, as well as the content and interpretations of the concept of incapacity for work (*idem*, 11). According to newer statistics, the variation in the rejection rate between men and women has remained the same, so that women's rejection rate was 1.3-1.4 times greater than men's with regard to national pension in 1995-1997 (Kela 1996, 88; Kela 1997, 89; Kela 1998, 89).

Sometimes it even happens that a pension application is rejected in the health care system in advance as a result of self censure, based on the knowledge of decision practices at the upper level. This happens in spite of the fact that the person who is being assessed is unable to cope. These situations are not included in the pension denial statistics. From 1994 on, the overall number of disability pension applications and decisions has decreased in Finland (Kela 1998, 90), reflecting the nationally set goals. This has happened simultaneously with the increase in the number of pension denials and the increase in long-term unemployment. Thus, it is valid to inquire about the number of unemployed who are currently incapable of working, in other words, those who have fallen between the cracks of working life and the pension system. To clarify the matter, Finland has implemented a broad tracking system (Rajavaara 1998; Lind 1997). My own hypothesis, based on my research, is that if the administrative approach is not changed, this assessment only results in one more circulation around the system to many disabled individuals.

I have also examined the 'falling-in-between' situation from the viewpoint of how the maintenance of good working morals turns out to be one of the functions of service systems and the assessment of working ability (e.g. Gould 1985, 71-72). On the other hand, I have also noted how shame and the effort 'to avoid the label of a slacker' can become a central feature in dictating one's behaviour after receiving a pension denial. Nicholas Rose (1998) has remarked that the naming-blaming-shaming circle has increased in the relations between the authorities and citizens during the post-modern governance practices of the 1990s, when more moral responsibility was being shifted on to individual citizens. In the

cases that I have studied, both clients and professionals are involved in the process of doing moral work. This arrangement also includes the critical point of the professional wielding of power: Under what conditions can we assess people without harming them in a situation in which, at a turning point in their lives, they are dependent on our professional definitions and decisions? How do we bear the responsibility for the consequences of our professional assessments?

People often fall in between the systems as a result of the selection process of working life, which is an intrinsic part of market mechanisms, employers' indifference to employees' working capacity (no one is supervising the maintenance of mental and physical working capacity and training readiness) and changes in the definitions of pension policy lines. Like their clients, many health care professionals are distressed and short of means. Clients who are circulated around the service system, never returning to working life, take up, in relation to their number, a great amount of the working hours at the different sectors and levels of the service system. Because of the lack of a satisfactory solution to their situations, they are often simultaneously clients of health care, rehabilitation organisations, social welfare, pension institutions and often even the employment office. In order to even be entitled to the basic benefits of an unemployed person, one has to be a client of several offices: the Social Insurance Institution, the employment office and, because the basic benefits are insufficient, very often the social office as well. In addition, a person who has lost part of his or her working capacity is usually a client of health care. Continuing insecurity in one's life situation gradually leads to other symptoms as well, potentially resulting in the person's assuming or being assigned the role of a chronically ill patient. This is how we make clients of persons who have fallen in between the cracks of the different systems. The outcome of this process, which often takes years, is that the client is able to receive a pension statement on the basis of his or her new symptoms. One's subsistence and future is secured, but at what cost? Circulation as an object of institutional suspicion has resulted in disempowerment as opposed to empowerment, in spite of the fact that individual workers may well be acting according to their best understanding and will.

Our service systems are very often structured enough so that the treatment of standard cases goes smoothly, while the system is unpre-

pared to handle exceptions (Metteri, 1998), such as pension denial cases, which can be considered exceptions in comparison with the so-called normal working capacity and rehabilitation assessment cases. The health care system makes one assessment after another of these people, which can be quite frustrating to both employees and their clients. However, there is really nothing more that the employees are able to do. The client does not feel that he or she is getting any help, nor does the employee feel that he or she is able to provide it. The clients are thus shuffled around, and each part of the service system works separately in its own restricted area.

The decision practices and implementation of social insurance actually seem to create traps for some people, from which, even with multiprofessional help, it is very difficult to escape. And yet, these unintended consequences of the system have not been given the attention they deserve. In Finland, the topic has been experienced as quite a volatile subject of discussion, in all likelihood because people have, justifiably, preferred to emphasise the excellence of our system as well as the inviolability of the harmony between the state and the medical profession. In the early 1990s, an address given by one of my colleagues at an international conference was interrupted when she, on the basis of her own research, touched on the subject of a 'falling-in-between' situation and the conflicts created by it. The person who interrupted her happened to be a representative of the social insurance system. In the early days of my career, another research colleague of mine expressed to me that his real research interest had been in studying the problems created by the 'falling-in-between' scenario, but that it was impossible to receive funding to study something like that. At that particular point, his research was being funded by sources close to the social insurance system. Thus, examining the functioning of the system that creates 'falling-in-between' scenarios seems to be quite taboo, and this is not restricted to the field of social work. As yet, no conceptual tools have been produced with which to analytically examine the phenomenon, because the social insurance system has not been interested in critical self-examination. The corporatist ministerial working group, representing employee and employer organisations, social insurance institutions and the state, assigned with the task of shedding light on the problems connected with disability pension in the current societal situation, did not include any critique on the functioning prin-



ciples of the social insurance system in the report it produced in 1998. As such, in this respect the situation remains the same to this day. The working group came to the conclusion that the biggest problem in a falling-in-between-working-life-and-pension-systems scenario is that the attending physician would lose his or her objectivity if he or she should take a stand on the inequity of the 'falling-in-between situation' (Muistio 1998). Not even the representatives of trade unions participating in these kind of ministerial working groups seem to be advocates of the marginalised members of their own unions.

My view, however, is that it is even more important now than ever before to examine the malfunctions of the system in these times that so greatly underline productivity. It is also necessary and useful to utilise the means of research in examining both the logic behind the functioning of the service system and its ability to respond to the needs of its clients. There is a danger that, in these times of technocratic efficiency calculations, the assessment and meaning of the impact of quality in human work might be forgotten. There is a danger that when only making calculations about performance, people are unable to view work in its entirety or its intersubjective nature. As the structure of morbidity changes and the illnesses connected with lifestyle, societal, social and psychological factors become increasingly common, there is reason to focus research on situations in which wider problems than just one illness are under scrutiny. At its best, social research has the potential to produce new perspectives and new ways of thinking, which in this case could be helpful in the allocation of the limited resources of the service system in a way, place and time that are relevant for the client.

From the inception of my research plan, the following thought, inspired by Klaus Hozkamp, has remained in my mind: If one wants to bring something new out into the open, it is not worthwhile to take a torch and go to places that are already well-lit, even though it is easy to move around there. Instead, one should try to shed some light on the shady places that have remained in the dark, even if one then might stumble onto fallen branches. When starting as a researcher I did not want to abandon the social worker's perspective. My real goal was not to become a researcher, rather, it was to study social work. I wanted to retain both the experience-based and the actor perspectives, and I did not want to limit my research subject to a narrow section of a larger whole. I wanted to study the assessment of complex situations as they

occur in practical work. I wanted to shed light on that controversial spot in multiprofessional assessment work and the implementation of social insurance where the social worker acts. Because of the unreasonable situations that I was repeatedly faced with in my work as a social worker, I wanted to delve deeper into the client's perspective in these difficult scenarios.

Reflecting on the matter afterwards, I probably also wanted to strengthen my voice as a social worker through research, which would provide me with the authority to give feedback. On too many occasions in my capacity as a social worker, I experienced that I lacked sufficient power and legitimate means for implementing social insurance in order to tackle those matters of which I possessed both understanding and expertise. Sometimes the whole multiprofessional team and the local authority network experienced this lack of power and disregard of expertise, when careful and well-grounded assessments were rejected in the benefit award decision practices of the upper level of the social insurance system. People's experiences and the institutional logic, the principles according to which institutions function, were in significant conflict with one another.

The upper level decisions of the social insurance system are made mainly on the basis of the natural sciences, while our pension laws and lower level assessment practices are based on multidisciplinary substantiation and multiprofessional team work (Metteri 1996). The legislation that governs working capacity and rehabilitation assessment requires that not only medical, but also other matters be taken into consideration when defining case situations and when making plans as part of working capacity and rehabilitation assessment. One cannot help noticing that the word 'reasonable' appears repeatedly in statutes, implying that consideration is needed when decisions are made:

....unable to do his usual work or other work comparable to it which can be considered suitable to him and which provides him with a *reasonable* subsistence, considering his age, skills and other factors. (KEL 347/56, 22§)

... as individual early disability pension, if an illness, ailment or handicap, factors connected with ageing, the number of working years, working conditions and the fatigue and weariness induced by

work have caused that his working capacity has deteriorated to the extent that it is not *reasonable* to expect him to continue his gainful employment any longer. (KEL 347/56, 22a§)

...When assessment about the decrease in working capacity is made, it should be done with consideration to the employee's ability to provide for himself by means of such available work which he can *reasonably* be expected to do, considering his education, earlier work history, age and living conditions and other comparable matters. (TEL 395/61, 4§)

When the social insurance system abandons its clients, it often means that they are abandoned by the health care system as well, because in a way they become viewed as lost causes. Here, the morality and politics of professional work come into the picture. What is the relationship between assessment and helping? What is the relationship between morality and knowledge? What obligation and authorisation does social work have for advocacy and for pointing out the system's defects or malfunctions? I have not been able to sufficiently locate the authority nor the means for this kind of 'pointing out' in the tradition of social work in Finland (however, Lehto 1991).

## The basis for the methodology, the data and the methods

The question of the relationship between human experience and institutional practices has long existed in social work, as have both the issues of the relationship between experience and scientific knowledge, and the suitability of methodological and theoretical approaches to research on social work (e.g. Reamer 1993). In my opinion, methodological choice is an issue of expediency, relative to the interests and data of the study. My study required the selection of a method with which I would be able to get in touch with the relationship between human experience and institutional logic. It was necessary that I simultaneously get in touch with both the micro and the macro. I needed to gain perspective on the relationship between institutional conditions and

human action. I obtained material from the phenomenological tradition for reflecting upon the lived experience, as well as for comprehending ontological and epistemological questions. On the other hand, many of Goffman's texts (e.g. 1952; 1987; 1963) focused on the very themes connected with the tradition of symbolic interactionism which had occupied my mind throughout the course of my work, and they helped me to reflect upon the institutional construction of identity and the issues of meaning. The tradition of critical social research reinforced my direction towards examining conflict situations (e.g. Harvey 1990).

I wanted to approach my research subject in a data-based manner, without strong theoretical preconceptions. I collected my primary data by taping the working capacity and rehabilitation assessment rounds in two gatekeeper organisations of persons whose pension applications had been denied, thus falling between the systems. It was crucial that I exercised patience in attempting to gain access to the field. I felt that I was stepping on sensitive and potentially explosive ground, but my professional experience was extremely helpful in the preparation of the taping situations. The members of the multiprofessional teams and the clients who had fallen in between the systems had confidence in what I was doing, for which I am grateful to them. I was not present at the client interviews and team meetings; instead, the employees handled the taping according to my instructions with the equipment I had given them.

I chose the cases on the basis of a theoretical sampling, and sought to include as great a variety as possible of the 'falling-in-between' scenarios. All in all, I taped the working capacity and rehabilitation assessment interviews of 13 clients who had received a pension denial and thus fallen in between the systems (90 situations in all). Considering my research problem, it was important for me to collect data from authentic situations in which complex cases were assessed multiprofessionally. In this way I was able to record conflict situations that had puzzled me professionally in my work as a social worker for the purpose of analytic examination. All of the tapings were transcribed, which made it possible to analyse them as texts.

After making a preliminary analysis of the first assessment rounds, I noticed that the share of the client's contribution to the discussion often remained relatively small in these professionally moderated discussions. I decided to conduct follow-up interviews with the clients. In this way their own account of the 'falling-in-between' situation and its

assessment, as well as information about the changes that took place after the assessment, became included in the analysis. I interviewed ten of the clients about half a year after the assessment round. In addition, I collected a fair amount of documents, including various statements from the clients concerning their working capacity, as well as the decisions of insurance institutions from the entire period of time during which their working capacity matter had been under consideration in the social insurance system.

My way of analysis has primarily been a constructionist application of grounded theory (Charmaz 1990). I examined the multiprofessional definition and interpretation of the 'falling-in-between' situation and the everyday coping of an individual in the talk between clients and professionals, in the talk amongst professionals, as well as in client's own narration to various people. As a social worker I had learned that the basic requirement for successful work was listening to and taking seriously the client's own personal story. As a researcher I still wanted to retain this cultural perspective.

In the grounded theory research model that I have applied, theoretical writing is closely connected with empirical analysis, and the process is retraceable by means of the ATLAS.ti analysis program (Muhr 1997). The treatment of data is based on a coding paradigm. Despite the breadth of my data, with the help of this program it has been technically simple to treat and connect the codes, data extracts and related theoretical or methodological notes to each other. I cannot imagine having been able to master data of this magnitude as comprehensively and systematically without the help of computer-based analysis.

Many guidebooks have suggested the constant comparative method and the analysis of deviant cases included in it as the basic tool for qualitative research. These are also the criteria for the quality and trustworthiness of the analysis in the grounded theory research model. Markku Lonkila (1993), who in his licentiate thesis studied the use of qualitative methods by Finnish researchers, has come to the conclusion that the grounded theory research method most systematically realises the method of comparison amongst the data. By means of constant comparison, one seeks to find in these differences a common characteristic which can help us to understand the variation within the data, and which can also provide some explanations for these variations. In the grounded theory model, the most important concept found

is referred to as the core concept of the study. Another central feature of the grounded theory research model is the accumulation of research material on the basis of a theoretical sampling. I have followed this principle in my own collection of data. However, in my opinion, moving around the different parts of the broad range of material over the course of the analysis can also be seen as theoretical sampling within the data.

Even though it has been my intention to do qualitative, data-based research with as open a mind as possible, my head has naturally not been completely void of theory when I have gone into the field to collect material. In doing this research, I have examined a practice field with which I am professionally acquainted, and the institutional system that has become familiar to me through my work. I had my own everyday theories and hypotheses about the state of affairs. The different connections that the researcher has with the area he or she studies have an impact on the perspective of the study. A social scientific study always includes a perspective which is connected with the researcher's values. This is not a flawed or misleading factor as such, but ignoring it in a qualitative study would be erroneous and would make the assessment of the results of the study difficult. I have therefore sought to objectify my own thinking by writing my hypotheses and theoretical thoughts in a research journal right from the beginning. In this way, the development of my own thinking can be retraced, and my initial hypotheses and their modification over the course of the process are recognisable. In a way, in the approach I have chosen the study proceeds so that the hypotheses made on the basis of one part of the data are tested in other parts of the data. One's own initial hypotheses are also tested and open to changes over the course of the research process.

The concepts are always derived from theory, and they connect the text with certain discussions and theoretical traditions. I have found some useful concepts for my study from existing literature, which I have used primarily as guiding and sensitising concepts (Strauss, 1987). For example, I have adopted the concept of a moral career from Goffman (1963, 45-55; 1987, 14, 134), because it helps me to see the client career as a recurring process of constructing identity. It is also helpful in reflecting on the moral and political dimension of work, which is always present in complex assessment situations. Another important concept is institutional suspicion, which Deborah A. Stone (1985) has focused on in her discourse; this concept visualises the long history of

the assessment of working capacity as an administrative practice. The concept has a counterpart in clients' experiences: the need to display one's moral worth. Extensive production of moral worth can be found in the clients' narration at different stages of the assessment round (analogically Baruch 1981; Silverman 1987). The concept of 'gate-keeping' (Foster 1983) also structures institutional assessment practices by means of which applications for benefits, pensions or rehabilitation are awarded or denied. In turn, this concept helps draw attention to the political nature of expert work - in other words, to the socio-political wielding of power.

## The interpretative horizon of the social worker in the analysis of complexity

When researchers make their interpretations, they attach meaning to the observations they produce by means of the methods and techniques they have chosen. What makes my reflections on my own interpretations as a researcher exciting to me is the fact that, in a way, my research subject also includes the production of interpretations of working capacity. My data includes different, and sometimes also contradictory, interpretations of a given client situation. I examine the relationship between these different interpretations, their production and consequences in multiprofessional everyday work. At the same time, I also examine the conditions and connections of different interpretations, as well as their impact on the relationship between the client and service system or client and society.

My interpretative horizon is 1) my experience of social work and multiprofessional work; 2) current practical knowledge of the subject matter; and 3) theoretical literature dealing with the themes. My questions have arisen from this position, and I examine the observations I have made on the basis of my data out of this position. However, the recognition of my own position neither kept me from constantly trying to cross my limits and to detach myself from my preconceptions, nor from making new and innovative observations. The solution for reconciling new observations with professional experience and expertise is reflection upon perspectives and limits.

However, in doing my research I have found no reason to dissociate myself from my social worker self and everything that I have learned in life up to now. Prof. Joseph Heffernan (Austin, Texas), who represents a positivistic tradition of science, has said that he demands that his post-graduate students abandon their social work perspective (post-graduate seminar, Tampere, May 1996). Combining practical expertise with research observations in producing research knowledge can, however, also be justified in the positivistic tradition (Kaakkuri-Knuuttila, 1996). I was eager to correct previously acquired knowledge the moment I discovered grounds for doing so. My assumption is that it is exactly this fact which allows my examination to be relevant in social work and multiprofessional assessment practices.

The point of departure in my study is the analysis of the client's experience; the relationship with the social insurance system that produces and maintains the identity of a person who has fallen between the systems. Following this, I have examined how this problematic relationship between the client and the social insurance system is treated in multiprofessional assessment work. For example, I pose the following questions: How does the team view people's everyday lives? What is the legitimacy of social knowledge in the multiprofessional assessment of people's working capacity? How are moral issues treated in a 'falling-in-between' scenario?

The time that has passed since I worked as a social worker has helped me to detach myself from the tension of the initial situation of my research. However, in practice, I was able even in the initial stages to surpass the tensions in, for example, conducting research permission discussions with people. I assumed that tension existed between issues and perspectives, but not between people. This is true in reality, although it often happens that genuine differences in professional perspectives and the conflicts caused by them are interpreted as conflicts between people, due to individual characteristics (Abramson & Mizrahi 1986), which makes it difficult to discuss the matters at hand. As Sands et al. (1989) have written, the honest recognition of the differences in perspective among various professions would benefit the practice of multiprofessional work. On the other hand, it is true that different professions do entrench themselves within their own territories, building collegial safety walls over which members of other professions are not permitted to climb, even if only to discuss issues which impact



matters that are handled jointly. Now, after many years, I no longer feel hindered in exposing a wide range of matters which are clearly visible in the data in the light of my themes. Is this the much-talked-about role of an intellectual: to feel free to voice what one sees without the fear of being quieted by one's employer. I appreciate this possibility, afforded to me by my position in the academia.

## Moral and political questions in the examination perspective

I have aimed at seeking and explicitly verbalising some of the critical points of the multiprofessional working ability and rehabilitation assessment practice. They affect the actions and the immediate experience of both professionals and clients, although their meaning is not always recognised in everyday work practices. I have described the character of these matters with the words 'moral' and 'political', and I have spoken about the fact that moral and political perspectives become buried under expert knowledge, which is expected to be neutral.

One basic problem in assessment work and in helping individuals who have fallen between the systems is caused by the fact that people think that working capacity and rehabilitation assessment is based on the use of scientific and professional, but simultaneously, morally and politically neutral knowledge. This myth of objective knowledge that governs the assessment culture of health care (about the myth see Sykes 1965; Hughes 1995) appears in the discussions of multiprofessional teams. Even those members of the team who rely on other kind of basic assumptions often adapt their work into this basic assumption. According to the most narrow interpretation, neutral knowledge, on which decisions can be based, is expected to be comprised of objective findings which rely on the natural sciences, and which are measurable by standard indicators. This medicalisation of complex situations is a real problem in the production of fruitful work, in which the desired result is the resolution, one way or another, of the deadlock situation of an individual who has fallen between the systems. Medicalisation, or the simplification of a phenomenon into a merely medical question, can be particularly problematic in social work, in

which expertise is inherently wide-ranging.

Quite an interesting tension exists between the medical and social work fields in an assessment team. This results from the fact that while the social worker officially bears professional responsibility for supporting the client's everyday ability to cope, as well as for making all of the pertinent arrangements, it is the doctor who is ultimately responsible for the statements used in rendering decisions on social security. From the point of view of helping and rehabilitation work, a good result would be the implementation of a plan which leads out of this deadlock, and which includes the authority's implementation responsibility. In other words, I do not find adequate a solution in which the assessment circulation of the client in question is continued. I have come to this conclusion after conducting the follow-up interviews with clients who have fallen between the cracks of the systems. In principle, there are two ways of proceeding in a reassessment situation: either with medicalisation, which is sufficient for a pension decision, or with an active search for new options. The realisation of a new rehabilitation plan presupposes individual follow-up and guidance, case management (Metteri 1997a and b; Havukainen 1997a and b; Piirainen 1997). As yet, this kind of guidance is not part of established practices.

The client's own experience of coping is interpreted several times during the expert rounds, and is also taken into consideration to a higher or lesser degree at the face-to-face meetings which are part of the research data. Much attention is also given to the client's relationship with both the social insurance system and the service system, as well as to the moral experiences (Goffman 1987; 1963) that have changed the client's identity during the perpetual process of the 'falling-in-between' career. I have used the term 'moral work' in the unravelling of this experience (Metteri 1995). It often happens that individuals who have fallen between the systems experience a sense that their own views or experiences are irrelevant in the process of decision-making in their cases. I have dubbed this phenomenon the 'when no one believes experience'. This is also the core concept of the first part of the study, and I have organised the interpretations and conceptualisations of the data concerning the individual's situation according to this concept.

The decisions concerning the client's situation come from administrative organs of the social insurance system with which he or she is unfamiliar, and often also surpass the views of the professionals who

are acquainted with his or her specific case. Correcting and amending a decision has proved to be a difficult and time-consuming process in 'falling-in-between' situations. The administrative appeal process after a negative decision takes an average of a year and a half. Of course, the slowness of the handling process and the long waiting periods can be seen as one way in which the social insurance system controls the number of appeals and defines pension policy. But this practice has nothing whatsoever to do with the legal protection of an individual. In my opinion, by utilising legal terminology, one could speak of juridical murder in this connection. Individuals who fall between the cracks of the systems are often left without advocates, or even advisors or people to help them sort matters out in their lives. In addition, the fact that the appeal process is not completed is often provided as grounds for not taking any action towards rehabilitation. According to this explanation, the person in question is not motivated for rehabilitation, while his or her pension appeal is pending. Thus, the individual is often left alone in his or her deadlock situation. Often the person closest to the individual in the system is the attending physician.

The 'when no one believes' experience reveals the relationship to the social insurance system that forms the identity of an individual who has fallen between the cracks of the systems. What is 'not believed' are the individual's own immediate experience of his or her corporeal state and the experience of everyday coping, which is related to the conditions of one's corporeality. Individuals have expressed a wide range of views of themselves in relation to the social insurance system with regard to the 'when no one believes' experience. I have distinguished a number of these, such as: 'the socially excluded', 'the drifter', 'the victim', 'the subservient', 'the outlaw', 'the outsider', 'the suspected slacker', 'the humble waiter', 'the wise but rejected'. A single individual's self-image can potentially contain many of these views.

Correspondingly, an intrinsic part of the 'when no one believes' experience is how the person in between the systems sees the opposite side, i.e., the decision-making level of the social insurance system. 'The socially excluded individual' experiencing inequity systematically sees him/herself as disadvantaged and socially excluded in comparison with other citizens found incapable of working. The social insurance system maintains and produces this social exclusion through its decisions, irrespective of the endeavours and unsuccessful attempts of the per-

son in question to return to working life. The experience of exclusion has personal, economic, local political and socio-political dimensions.

The second part of my study deals with the work of multiprofessional expert teams. The *logic of objective findings* connected with the myth of neutral knowledge is a general concept in the light of which I have been able to structure much of the incompatibility of the different perspectives that is manifest in handling the 'falling in between' situations. The moral experiences that professionals and clients work on in assessment situations are also related to the logic of objective findings. The frequently encountered concept of '*objective findings*' is thus a very strong practical concept in the definition of people's actions. It is simultaneously an epistemological and methodological choice concerning the knowledge to be applied in assessment work, the nature of knowing and the methods of collecting information. It can also be regarded as an ontological attitude, characterising the nature of reality (Varto 1992). This has become the central concept in my research, and in following grounded theory, I have sought to attain theoretical integration in my study by examining its properties and dimensions, its connections, consequences, sub-concepts, relation to other concepts etc. In practice, it is the thematic order derived from this main concept that I have used when organising my analyses of both the co-operation between the different professions and my related notes. Interesting as deviant cases are team situations in which, for example, some members of the team consciously attempt to question the logic of objective findings, which results in the instigation of a conflict.

When reassessing the relationship between the social insurance system and a person who has fallen in between the systems, the expert team is generally unable to find new solutions when following the logic of objective findings. Sometimes the situation is reverted back to the local level, at which nothing innovative is expected to be found, either because the local statutory co-operative team handling the case of a joint client has previously dealt with it and recommended a pension assessment, or because the co-operative team does not function, etc. It appears that one option that would be both positive from the client's viewpoint and would also follow the logic of objective findings is that the team assume the strengthening of medicalisation as its conscious strategy, basing it upon the consideration of what is just and fair. Thus, in reaching a fair decision, the team employs the means that have been

accepted as valid by the upper level.

What is interesting is that after a marked increase in the cases of inequity post pension denial, the internal control of the social insurance system attempts to bring the attending physicians back to the logic of objective findings. The corporatist working group established by the ministry emphasises in its report that the attending physician cannot and may not act as the patient's advocate, but must rather remain impartial. The physician must not pay attention to inequities. (Muistio 1998, 39-40.) This means that if physicians are to do their work according to the regulations, they cannot and may not use moral consideration even in inequitable situations. When taken literally, this would imply that common sense and human understanding are excluded from the work of a physician. Within the social insurance system, the belief in objective expertise and objective scientific facts as the criteria for social insurance still appears.

The 'when no one believes' experience and the logic of objective findings are intertwined in the provision of pension insurance. When people follow the logic of objective findings in their actions, the 'when no one believes' experience becomes likely under certain conditions. According to previous studies, one such condition is the complexity of the situation (there is not one clear illness that is verifiable by means of standard measures, but rather there are a wide range of illnesses and ailments, as well as various strains and difficulties caused by an individual's life situation). When complex situations are decided based upon expertise which is narrow in scope, the outcome is that people are continuously shuffled around and fall between the cracks of the systems.

## Using the researcher's own experience

I have found the research process to be both motivational and rewarding. One reason for this has been that analysing the data has invited me to mentally return to my own experiences of practising social work, and to select certain memorable incidents and situations to compare and discuss with the data. At this point I will intentionally digress in order to depict the case of Hilda Havenot, a research subject who feels that she herself is socially excluded. Through this depiction, my aim is to illustrate the way in which I have used the stories of the different people

in my data, as well as my criticism related to these stories in the reflection on my data. Also, what we are dealing with here is the relationship between aggregate analysis or variable analysis and the production of a knowledge base in the in-depth understanding of the cases (e.g. Stake 1995).

Although the grounded theory approach emphasises variable analysis based on certain themes, one of the aims of my study is also the aspiration to understand human experience as deeply as possible. I cannot help noticing the tragicomic features which are often inherent in these situations. I have begun to view the handling of many affairs in society as a farce as opposed to the actions of wise men.

Following assessment by a multiprofessional team, Hilda Havenot, who suffers from a chronic disease and needs constant medication, is without her medicine because she cannot afford to purchase it. She is reluctant to seek social assistance from the local social welfare office, for fear that doing so would result in her shameful condition becoming common knowledge to the local people in her small community. She does not want to endure further humiliation. When all else fails, one hopes to at least retain one's self-esteem. Yet, she had no choice but to pay for the prescribed aids herself, as the Social Insurance Institution had rejected the disability allowance application that was drafted during the course of the assessment round. In addition, she was forced to leave the job that she had managed to find, because her ailments prevented her from being able to work. One cannot blame her for not trying.

In the case of Hilda Havenot, the result of the reassessment round is unsuccessful, and the outcome certainly does not add to the credibility of the system. Even if we were to consider the societal economic advantage, the reassessment round has been futile, despite the minimal short term savings in the pension budget. The explicit grounds for the decision in Hilda Havenot's case were biologically and numerically expressible, but also required a change of lifestyle: Hilda Havenot weighs too much, is overweight. According to the current regulations of social insurance, society can only support someone who is slightly thinner than Hilda Havenot. According to the regulations applied by physicians, this is due to the fact that it is impossible to assess an individual's working capacity as long as obesity can be assumed to be one source of the individual's ailments. In this connection, I would like to point out that, during the past few years, there has been serious discussion in

Germany about decreasing the sickness benefits of obese individuals. After going through three separate diet treatments, Hilda Havenot had still not successfully lost weight, and, according to the final interpretation of the team, should begin a fourth one before her case could be readopted with regard to possibly receiving social insurance. In the follow-up interview, Hilda Havenot remarked in passing to the researcher that the assessors were not one bit thinner than she.

The case of Hilda Havenot highlights how problematic it can be to mechanically use biological criteria as a basis for provision of benefits. In my own interpretational horizon of social work, one association can be seen as follows: Even if it leads me down scientifically precarious paths, I cannot help but see a parallel in my mind between Hilda Havenot and the case of a Large Man from my work experience in the 1980s. This Large Man finally received his pension on the grounds that he was proven unable to lose weight and incapable of working in the condition he was in at the time. The situation was carefully examined and the grounds were adapted to the psychiatric illness classification, in other words, an illness number was given to the inability to lose weight. A photograph was appended to the documents. The Large Man did receive his pension. In this case an objective finding, obesity, was interpreted in a manner exactly opposite to Hilda Havenot's case. However, before this could be done, the case had to be described in psychiatric terms, despite the fact that the Large Man did not come to the assessment for psychiatric reasons.

The interpretation system of working capacity is thus by no means consistent, and even if we were to draw up new and accurate guidelines, we cannot guarantee that clients will be treated equally within the organisations that draw the lines in the decision-making process. My conclusion is that individual consideration of what is morally and politically just and fair should be explicitly observed in the handling of these complex denial cases. Careful descriptions and the conclusions based on them should play a legitimate role in the process of handling such matters. The arbitrariness of the system could be diminished by following the old judge's rule: 'What is not just and fair, cannot be a law.' Perhaps we should have shot a video film about Hilda Havenot's everyday life. In her case, the 'falling-in-between' situation eventually turned into a situation in which she was blamed. According to my professional experience, this happens quite often in benefit denial situa-

tions, and it is a mechanism worth further scrutiny, because as opposed to relieving the situation, the system adds to the burden of individuals who really are in dire straits. It is from these situations that the naming-blaming-shaming circle, discussed by Nicholas Rose (1998), ensues.

Hilda Havenot did not regain the role of a patient that was once assigned to her (Parsons 1951), which would have relieved her from responsibility. This role was later taken from her by the social insurance system. The myth of objective knowledge creates reality in the described situation so that it justifies the passive moral-political attitude of the physicians and the team, because the measures used do not indicate that the individual in between the systems has sufficient ailments to result in the incapacity to work. In the framework of the natural sciences, i.e., when acting according to the principles of objective findings, the treatment of moral-political matters is unprofessional and unscientific, in other words, irrelevant. In the data of my research, however, moral issues are considered and advocacy is used, particularly in discussions between an experienced social worker and a client, sometimes also in discussions between a psychologist and a client (Metteri 1996).

Through the illustration of one more case, I shall return to the views, in the context of the 'when no one believes situation', that individuals in between systems have of themselves in relation to the social insurance system. As was customary in the early 1990s, Martha Misfit is instructed at the Social Insurance Institution to apply for a disability pension after 300 sick days. The attending physician gives Martha a certificate of her incapacity for work, and she reluctantly 'drifts' into a pension application process, which because of this reluctance is not very well prepared. Martha Misfit experiences the working of the social insurance system to be very inconsistent. First, it is recommended to her that she apply for a pension, and then, after doing so, reluctantly giving up working life, her application is denied. After this, the social insurance system seems to work according to the principle: 'Once you're discovered, you'll always be suspected'. The system has put a label on the individual applying for pension benefits, which stays with her even if her situation changes. When the assessment team follows the logic of objective findings, pointing out flaws in the earlier assessment process is not part of the process of decision-making. This in turn means that earlier flawed assessments are not corrected, in other words, there is no room to change an interpretation. The system does not recognise



its flaws, and what is surprising is that expert teams never base their work on finding defects in earlier decisions, but instead, always look for new objective evidence. The myth of objective knowledge thus also includes the myth of flawless decisions.

Again, my own social work research horizon stimulated me to reminisce unscientifically: Once, when the situation was very obvious, I mustered up my courage and broke a taboo (the wordless agreement that it is only doctors who can attitude on questions concerning medical certificates) by drafting an account in which I reinterpreted the objective findings, which I then appended to the pension appeal documents. In it I singled out an obvious interpretational flaw that I had detected at the beginning of the pension application process: the symptoms caused by a predisposition to adhesive substance use had been defined as psychiatric. I drew my inferences on the basis of the work history of my client, who was incapable of working, on the basis of an account of her situation and the development of her illness, as well as on the basis of general information regarding her predisposition to solvents, provided by our team physician. The connection between my client's working environment and the development of her symptoms had been ignored at the beginning of the process. The woman, who had occupationally glued soles to shoes, received her pension following the appeal. In my role as a social worker, I was implementing advocacy. On the basis of my experience, I have learned that in similar situations I should pay attention to the employer's economic calculations, and the divided loyalty of the doctor of the occupational health service between the employer and the employee's tasks (Walsh 1986; Goffman 1952). In the background of all of this is an economic factor which has an impact on the decisions: As enterprises reach a certain size in Finland, they are obligated to pay their share of occupational disease compensations, if the loss of working capacity is found to have been caused by one's occupation.

## Methodological reflection

When I set out to do research on social work, I did not want to alter my values and life goals. I wanted to retain my commitment to the

ethical perspectives of social work. I wanted to retain an overall view, and do research on social work that would be relevant to multiprofessional practices, to social work and to the clients who are in dire straits as a result of their falling between the cracks of the different systems. Even in my capacity as a researcher, I wanted to retain both the experience and the actor perspective. Applying the ideas of grounded theory in the analysis in no way hindered this. Hence, in my study I first conceptualised my clients' experiences between the systems and their relationship with the social insurance system, as well as the identity of such individuals, which is produced by that relationship. Next, I examined the encounters between the client and the multiprofessional team, as well as the institutional conditions for working on the case of a client who has fallen between the cracks of the systems. The core concepts of my study, on which theoretical integration is based, are the 'when no one believes' experience and the logic of objective findings.

If we perceive research on social work as part of the practice of social work, then to what part of this practice does my study belong? Through my research, for both my own benefit and the benefit of others, I have conceptualised (i.e. visualised and clarified) some of the inconsistencies which had seemed important in the practice of social work, but which were quite difficult to grasp. The ideas of grounded theory are suitable for a systematic conceptualisation of empirical data, even though I have availed myself of the right to use them in a way which is compatible with my data and my thinking. The resulting theory should, as Turner (1981, 240) has said, 'reflect, as faithfully as the researcher can manage, the complexities of that portion of the world which has been studied'. Another feature of grounded theory is 'a closeness of fit with the area being studied which renders it understandable to lay participants in that area' (*ibid.*, 240). Judith Green (1998) has made an assessment of how the grounded theory approach works in research on health care. In her opinion, a well reported data-based study can open up the client perspective to decision-makers and professionals.

Over the course of my research process, I have given a lot of thought to how I can produce a theoretical core concept which is based on the data, and against which the variation within the data can be explained and understood. Does the aim of a study necessarily have to be this kind of theoretical result, as the original idea of grounded theory according to Kathleen Wells (1995), for example, implies? Is the result

alone not sufficient, even if one produces a comprehensive description of the conditions, the process and the outcome of the actions? Is it not enough in a data-based qualitative study that one produces a new typology of the phenomenon on the basis of the data? If one applies the method in a novel and independent manner, one should perhaps avoid claiming on the basis of the presented basic criteria of grounded theory that the study belongs to the grounded theory tradition, created by Strauss and Glaser (1967). It would be more accurate to say that such a study has been influenced by this tradition, and that the researcher is doing research in his or her own way (e.g. the cases of Abramson & Mizrahi 1994; Burnette 1994; Gregg 1994). This is perhaps what I should say about my study. In my opinion, it is the person applying the method who is responsible for how it is used: mechanically and schematically, or creatively, adapting it to the purpose. Methods are not good or bad as such.

On the other hand, grounded theory is a research approach which is so widely used that it encompasses a wide variety of applications which may have mutually incompatible starting points. The fact that a researcher has used grounded theory does not in itself reveal how he or she has proceeded in doing research. Locke (1996) has investigated how researchers who study organisations have used the grounded theory method. Most of the authors he uses in his study lean on Glaser and Strauss's book from 1967, and have not used the textbooks on the grounded theory method that have been published after it (1978, 1987, 1990, 1992). The method of constant comparison was in most cases mentioned as a characteristic feature of the approach, but the other important feature, the theoretical sampling, was generally not discussed. Locke criticises the users of this method, stating that they merely refer to the method as a rhetorical justification, not to specify their own methodological approach. Hence, they are only rewriting the method in a superficial manner.

Grounded theory has been said to have both positivistic and phenomenological roots (e.g. Charmaz 1990; Locke 1996). According to Locke (*ibid.*), grounded theory has, since the publication of Glaser and Strauss's book, developed in two different directions, in which the researcher's relation with the surrounding world differs. Locke feels that Glaser and the researchers close to him follow the positivistic grounded theory tradition, in which the researcher is regarded as objective, as someone out-

side the world that is being studied. While the approach used by Strauss and the researchers close to him allows the researcher to pose questions to the data, he or she is seen as an interpreter of the data.

According to my experience, a research process inspired by grounded theory approach can contain many similar elements as the reflexive working process of social work, which seeks to assess itself and recognise its place. Sensitising concepts guide thinking and the recognition of phenomena, but only in a subtle way, because reality cannot be forced into previously established categories. The guiding principle is openness to what one encounters in the process, which means that no previously established theoretical definitions are used in the examination of the data. The goal is an open and dialogic interaction with what one finds. The construction of understanding is based on what one discovers along the way, not on old routines and old explanations. The theory that guides the thinking is constructed, specified and corrected on the basis of one's findings, in other words, on the basis of the data. The core concept, developed on the basis of the data, is used in explaining the variation within the data. In a way, one attempts to bring out the main plot. The grounded theory model asks, quite like one asks in reflexive social work: What explains this variation? What is it all about?

Grounded theory also resembles the working process of the reflexive and progress-seeking social worker, because the clues found on the basis of the analysis of the data are tested both in new parts of the existing data and in new data, and the results are also compared with other studies and other social work situations. In this way, the researcher conducts careful comparison both within the data and between different data in order to ensure that certain aspects have a connection or a socially constructed causal relationship. When interpreting the results, the researcher takes into account his or her own experience, earlier results, views and theories, with which he or she is in a dialogic relationship. Even if the starting point for the study has been quite open, the research and interferences that guide the researcher's actions are thus based on a sturdy foundation, and have a connection with the chosen discussions. Through this openness, we attempt to avoid the blindness that obstructs our vision of the unexpected things that come our way. Even considering the development and the instruction of the practices of social work, the way in which we combine the existing traditions and methodological practices with innovative openness and

dialogic interaction is extremely important.

As Strauss (1987) has emphasised, at its best, the theoretical erudition and empirical experience of the researcher are combined with the observations made on the basis of the data in the grounded theory model. The research process is comprised of the interaction between these three elements. In my opinion, the same could be said about reflexive social work. At its worst, grounded theory can be the mere mechanical coding of data and the construction of empty categories, for which the method has been criticised. However, this is a view of what social work can be when it functions mechanically and categorises in a detached and routine manner. If one only emphasises technique and method, the result will be poor both in research and in practice.

The difficult situations of social work have not diminished in number as Finnish society has developed. On the contrary, my research subject and perspective have become increasingly topical during the current decade. The problems of social deprivation, the phenomenon of falling in between the cracks of the systems and inequity have become more acute than ever in Finland in the 1990s. We have gone through an economic recession and a fundamental societal change, after which unemployment has remained a permanent phenomenon. Even after the economic recession had evened out, we still had a 16.5 per cent unemployment rate at the end of 1997, and of nearly 13 per cent at the end of 1998 (Työmarkkinat TM 1997:12, 1998:12). The implementation of a work-based subsistence system during periods of high unemployment has challenged the expertise and traditional working practices of social work in many ways. The simultaneous increase in long-term unemployment, the lessening of the number of positions in working life and the tightening of the criteria for receiving social security makes it necessary also to search for new solutions in professional work. The collision between previous structures or practices and new life situations brings about paradoxes that can be seen in the direct practice of the social worker. Under the circumstances of lesser economic resources, justice and equity become important issues in the decision-making concerning individuals and groups of people. The political and moral aspect of the social worker's work has become recognisable in a new way.

*Translation into English: Pirjo Kuuselo*

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IV

KALEIDOSCOPE



*Synnöve Karvinen*

## THE METHODOLOGICAL TENSIONS IN FINNISH SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

### The professional field and the research

In the field of Finnish social work in the 1990s, a debate is going on surrounding the teaching, learning and researching of social work. At the heart of this discussion are the dichotomous relationships between science and profession, theory and practice, and thinking and action. From the point of view of social work, the key question in this debate is what the relation between knowledge and work, expertise and professional practise is. The tensions of an epistemological and research political discussion are deeply rooted in the doctrinal history of social work, which in Finland is also based a great deal upon the Anglo-American tradition. The most intensive developmental phase in Finland, however, has taken place simultaneously with the academisation of social work since the beginning of the 1980's. In this process, the relationship of social work as a professional practice in respect to academic science has been defined. Social work has been searching for its place in the academic world under the pressure of many epistemological, methodological and research political and professional interests.

In this article I shall analyse epistemological, methodological and research political tensions, and the discussions in today's Finnish social

work research. In Finland, social work research has been expanding and searching for its own place, simultaneously as research education and professional academisation have begun to produce results, and as broader research projects originating from social work's own points of departure have begun to gain some foothold, and also to begin to uncover and visualise professional practices and their structural logic, and to study even the hidden processes of professional practices and power constructions. This has required the search for methodologically innovative solutions in research. Developing social work research has also created spaces for methodological discussion, which naturally become entangled with both current epistemological debates and respective methodological openings. As the main material for my reasoning I will use both the methodological discussions focused on in the articles contained in this book, and also my own previous research on social work expertise (Karvinen 1996). Each writer in this book is searching for his or her own methodological ways of conceptualising social work as a social practice which encounters the unique nature of individuals and their daily lives. Social work includes many ethical and political tensions as a result of its specific nature, and similar tensions can be found in social work research.

The conditions of the development of professional social work can also be examined through the sociological concepts referred to as a 'professional field' (Konttinen 1991), which consists of professional qualification and operational areas, educational institutes and expert conceptions. The professional field of Finnish social work has been formed as a part of the professional system of the Finnish welfare state. This system of professions is a stage of continuous negotiations and re-arrangements (Abbott 1989; Johnson 1995; Konttinen 1994; Mutka 1999). According to Satka (1995), the field of social work can be understood as a network of changing practices and social relations, in the framework of which knowledge and written doctrines have achieved an increasingly important, development-guiding significance. The professional doctrine not only describes the world, but the concepts and practices formed by it also specify how people understand who and what they are in the society in which they live. No matter how "noble" our goals might be, socially constructed professional practices are always entangled with power relations. (Popkewitz 1994, 7-12.) Thus, research work is also part of this political system.

In the professional field of social work, a wide range of changing power relationships can be detected. The relationships between various professions, educational and research institutes that produce professional and scientific expertise, employer and financing circles and the institutions of state administration are changing due to both the reorganisation of the welfare state towards a marketised and managerial state, and the rearrangement process of social and healthcare services (e.g. Clarke & Newman 1997; Henkel 1994; Leonard 1999; Mutka 1998). There is ongoing competition between social expertise and the jurisdictional area of social work, and the reconstruction of the professional field. It seems that we are going to be faced with a new professional structure, which is marked by the market and managerial customer-buyer-producer model and profit-efficiency thinking (Ala-Nikkola & Sipilä 1996; Exworthy & Halford 1999). In these changing structures, the relationship between social work expertise, research and practice will also be redefined.

## The critical reflexivity and social work expertise

The development in social work seems to be following the change from modern professionalism, which is based on the belief in the controllability of the world, towards uncertainty, flexibility, multi-professionalism and the hybrid and alternative working approaches of post-modern expertise (Karvinen 1996). Social work expertise is now seen as being tied to a specific time, place, and context of action, rather than to some previously structured, universal knowledge base, as was the assumption during the peak of professionalism over the last few decades. Its core consists of a critical analysis of one's own work, based on a combination of scientific knowledge and personal as well as professional expertise. The qualifications of a professional social worker cannot be built only on externally defined competencies and tasks. Rather, social work expertise is characteristically dialogic, discursive and reflexive.<sup>1</sup>

During the past few years, the ideas of a reflective practitioner and critical reflection have become central themes in the discourses on social work education, research and professional development (Fook et al. 1997; Fook 1996; Gould & Taylor 1996; Granfelt et al. 1993; McCart

& Mullen 1995; Jackson & Preston-Shoot 1996; Karvinen 1993b; Yellolly & Henkel 1995). In the wave of a paradigmatic turn in the understanding of scientific expertise and knowledge, the reflective learning models have become central in the pedagogy in institutions of higher education. The current goal is to bring up critically reflective, transformative learners and reflexive experts. (Brockbank & McGill 1998, 48-55; Satka & Karvinen 1999.)

According to my interpretation (Karvinen 1996, 61), critical reflectivity is not only a question of the specification of an individual's personal thoughts and experiences. Critical reflectivity and transformative learning comprise the consciousness and evaluation of the concepts, psychic ways of reaction, as well as the communal, social and cultural processes of their formation, which control our thinking and activity (Mezirow 1981, 11-15). Understood through the concepts of transformative learning, critical reflectivity "involves not only deconstructing meanings and the taken-for-granted attitudes, myths and ways of seeing things, but also by reconstructing, re-conceptualising and rebuilding – a continuous process that becomes the subject of transformative learning" (Brockbank & McGill 1997, 49). The change of action and the perspectives of understanding and meaning can also be seen by Mezirow (1991,167) as transformative learning: "the transformation of perspective is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world. It is a process where these constructions change and which allows a more holistic and sophisticated perspective and finally which provides an opportunity to choose and take alternative actions."

The professional practices and professional thinking that guides professionals' working orientation are both locally and socially constructed (Abbott 1988; Payne 1997). The professional practices are also a part of social power and operational structures. These power structures can be realised even in the simple routines of everyday work (Giddens 1984; Smith 1990; Unger 1987), and changing them begins with critical reflection (Mezirow 1991). In social work, the practices of client work and the clients' rights to self-determination, participation and access to the documents which concern their cases are crucial. Primarily, it is of course a question of both working towards normal citizenship, autonomy and the opportunity to live an independent life,



as well as towards improving the service systems which support these aspects. As opposed to their colleagues, who have worked within the systems of modern professionalism, the professionals of the future will be forced to increasingly take into consideration professional power, responsibility and ethics (Karvinen 1996). An analogy between reflexive practitioners and researchers becomes visible, as transformative learning, which implies the opportunity to change ones actions, is necessary for both (Delanty 1998, 113-123).

## The methodological connection between research and practice

The subjective, interpretative and socially constructed character of knowledge can also be read in the methodological considerations of the authors of this book. In the emphasis of the subjectivity of all knowledge, the point of departure proves to be the reality which is constructed from the researcher's own perspective. Finally, all knowledge can be understood as contextual and constructed. However, the conceptualisations in this book do not move within an 'extremist relativistic' region (Peile & McCouat 1997, 356). Rather, efforts are made to visualise both the narratives constructed through the communication and interpretations of the actors, as well as the practices, structures and structural processes which control them. Or, as Mirja Satka notes in broader terms within this book: "I am a social scientist, a producer and transformer of the knowledge under study, and thus personally deeply concerned about the future of social intervention and social work. I find the action to be a social construction, which can have its existential reality." She continues by noting that: "... there is no contradiction between accepting that events, actions and institutions are social constructions, and co-accepting that they have an existential reality of their own; they are constructed in particular ways at particular times and places, and the goal of the realist sociologist is to get as close as possible to being able to 'tell it like it was'." However, all of this implies a significant change in the epistemological sense. Perhaps one might even refer to an "epistemological turn" (Peile & McCouat 1997, 343). According to Satka (1998, 198), the most central change concerns the

fact that scientific information is no longer independent, but is in continuous interaction with various other kinds of knowledge in the everyday practices of actors.

When analysing the methodological standpoints, we will inevitably have to express our position on epistemological questions: "how do we know what we know and who we are" (Pozatek 1994). Knowledge that fails to achieve the multidimensionality of social work lacks both significant adaptive value and the power of explanation (Sheppard 1998; Riessman 1994). On the other hand, both the research and practice of social work are reminiscent of one another as qualitative processes. This unity of research and practice could be expressed as follows: "we need to get on with the collective job of exploring a creative way forward which allows and preserves social work's capacity, and, on the other hand, to be able to respond in a clear, enthusiastic, imaginative way to unlock the potential of the people with whom social workers work" (Peile & McCouat 1997, 356). As human actors, both social workers and their clients become methodologically significant as the producers and interpreters of information, acting in collaboration with the researcher. The social workers themselves and their clients as human actors rise up to the heart of methodology as producers and interpretators of knowledge, together with the researcher.

It is important to create a variety of research strategies, approaches and methods in the research of social work. The research methods should be sensitive enough to uncover not only general tendencies, but also contextual particularities, and they should also recognise the researcher's reflexivity and standpoint and draw upon empirical evidence. Additionally, it must be emphasised that in the research of social work, the researcher is by no means the only agent whose role and position should be reflected upon in the studies of social work. Meanings are also accomplished by other agents, i.e. by social workers and clients. The research programmes should be constructed to involve all the relevant agents and their action. (Riessman 1994 xi-xv; Juhila & Pösö, in this book.)

The writers of this book are researchers who are both interested in the construction of the tradition of social work research, and who are representative of some of the most central developments of Finnish social work research throughout the past few years. Since the MA degree became the qualification of a professional social worker in 1981, social

work has established itself as a university level educational and research field. Now, in the year 1999, social scientific examinations and social work education is undergoing a renewal. This change will strengthen social work as an academic subject and as a research field. The development has also included the attachment and extension of researcher education as a part of the training of qualified social workers. There is also a growing amount of doctoral and postdoctoral research in the field of social work. Most of the authors of this book either have or will soon be publishing their doctoral thesis on the subject of the field of social work in the 1990's. The writers are also united by an interest in both examining and visualising social work's professional practices and the conditions of their formation, as well as searching for research methodological solutions which are adaptable in social work.

However, the articles in this book are examples of a select group of research practices, and are not representative of the entire field of Finnish social work research. Missing from the group are researchers who examine social problems and the welfare state through quantitative approaches, and whose research is primarily socio-politically oriented, although also relevant to social work. Evaluation research, which is taking shape as a kind of empirical research programme (Eräsaari 1999; Suikkanen & Piirainen 1997), is not represented in our book either. However, with all of its inherent tensions, it would be quite relevant to the issues concerning research methodology in social work research in general, as many of the methodological and epistemological problems of it are also vivid in evaluation research. The basic question for both is whether social work practice should be based on empirically tested scientific knowledge, or if the research should open up new options, alternative approaches and instruments for social change. Once again, these problems cannot be viewed as "either/or" questions. Questions of epistemology and validity are extremely complicated in social work research, as it is impossible to separate them from practice, as Sheppard (1998,772-774), who is searching for 'practice validity' and 'epistemic reflexivity', notes. One is attempting to solve the same problem when searching for a 'realistic alternative' (Shaw & Shaw 1997, 853) to social work research and evaluation. In the background of this question lie the basic epistemological and methodological problems of understanding what knowledge is and how it can be produced. In addition, there are the questions of how actors' un-

derstanding is constructed, and how that understanding could be changed. Do we have realistic opportunities to create a kind of joint understanding, or, on the other hand, how does knowledge construct our own action? These are the type of epistemological and research methodological questions that unite the contributors to this book.

## The researchers of the turning point

Social work research in Finland could be described as facing a turning point. It is expanding and searching for its place in both the process of social change in the emerging reflexive, post-modern society, and in the process of the rebuilding of the professional structure of the changing welfare state. The studies of each of the authors in this book contribute to the development of reflexive expertise and social work research.

### *The constructors of common knowledge*

As Riitta Granfelt (1999, in this book) writes, the researcher's role includes the role of interpreter; from her own point of departure, the researcher creates an interpretation of her object of study. In her research on women's displacement and homelessness, Granfelt (1998) has quite profoundly examined the significance of producing social scientific knowledge. She formulates her basic question as follows: "Who are these women, what are my chances of entering their world, and what would be the most appropriate words for describing their lives." According to Granfelt, the empirical data consists of the narrated and interpreted lives. Her research object in this study is the life stories of and by homeless women. As a researcher, she has made efforts to use concepts that are not too distant from the expressions used by the women, but that summarise and clarify the main themes of their stories. Her methodological starting point has been that the women have described and interpreted their lives interactively with the researcher. The task of the researcher has been to solicit the stories, to invite and encourage the women to take the role of narrator, and also to concentrate on the themes that they most want to focus on. She has made an effort to engage in intensive interaction with these women, in order to empathise with their stories. Her goal has been

to build a common space that primarily consists of the women's own narratives of their lives. She approached the world inhabited by these women through her own background and theoretical standpoints. Her primary aim is the abolishment of hierarchies within the study: the individuals studied are able to voice their opinions regarding the correctness of the researcher's views.

Granfelt emphasises that her starting-point has been thorough subjectivity and an effort to recognise similarities as well as differences. She has attempted to delve as deeply as possible into the specific, through which she searches for generality. In this connection one could refer to so-called 'combined knowledge'. Empathy is of central significance in the formation of combined knowledge: personal experience helps the researcher to listen to the other person, and to understand how he or she interprets reality. Empathy implies becoming emotionally touched while simultaneously preserving separateness. To Granfelt, empathy is simultaneously a dialogue between feelings and thought, and between herself and the other person. The information produced this way is combined knowledge. Through the production of knowledge the researcher and subject inhabit a shared space, which makes the construction of a shared narrative possible.

In her research on the everyday practices of social work, Leena Eräsaari (1999, in this book) examines similar questions: listening to and seeing a human being, the observation and location of 'combined information'. She pays specific attention to the fact that frequently doctrinal and/or methodological plurality and orthodoxy, both in science and in professional operation, creates distance, keeps the client at a distance, away from his or her own voice. In Eräsaari's (1995) research, photographs and videos proved to be a very powerful tool of portraying the clients' stories, the courses of their lives and subjective experiences. Thus, the use of the camera seems to create surprising possibilities in cases in which research has emancipatory goals, when the researcher is striving for change, or for participation and real dialogue with the individuals in her study. Eräsaari also pays attention to the fact that 'official science' is not a very reliable producer of knowledge. In referring to the history of social work research (Deegan 1988), Eräsaari writes that: "The social sciences, in their zeal to maintain methodological and/or doctrinal orthodoxy, ignore important tools for collecting and processing social data." According to Eräsaari, it is not cer-

tain whether 'their doctrines' are generally worth following. For her own part, she calls for interdisciplinary thinking and variety, by which she is referring to different materials and methods, as well as different modes of reporting research. (Eräsaari 1999, in this book.)

The primary methodological problem of social work research is how to visualise individuals' experiences and everyday lives. People's subjective experiences and activities as independent subjects are easily ignored, which is why social work research is constantly searching for new innovative frameworks. Referring to Williams & Popay's (1999, 179) ideas, Maritta Törrönen (1999, in this book) considers the generation of a new paradigm for the practice of welfare research possible. This is extremely important, as the practice of social work involves not only the structuring of individuals' everyday lives, but their lives in entirety. A vivid example of the power of social work is the intervention in the life of a child who has been taken into care.

In researching the lives of children in care, Maritta Törrönen has had to develop methodological solutions that are adaptable to the specific conditions of studying children. Her solution has been ethnography, which "refers to the study of everyday knowledge and of the procedures and cognitive patterns by which members of society understand their living conditions, operate within them and influence them". In addition, this approach "stresses the interpreted and constructed nature of social reality". Törrönen refers to Anthony Giddens when stating that she does not see social reality as merely a construction of speech, but rather as a combination of social action, speech and structure. However, it is also crucial that the subjective agency be highlighted: "As in childhood research, children are interpreted as creative agents, acting upon, negotiating and developing their own strategies of welfare management" (see Williams & Popay 1999).

The reflexive ethnography adapted by Törrönen also emphasises the researcher's role as the interpreter of knowledge. She regards the reflexive production of knowledge as a central starting point of research. The researcher 'has at different stages' in the research process had to consider how to enter the field, how to conduct the observation and interviews, as well as the role of both the researcher and the persons under study. Reflexivity is manifested in ethnographic research as participation by the researcher in the everyday lives of the persons under study, as interaction between the researcher and the group, but also in the fact

that the research problem is developed in the process in which research conducted reflexively is revealed as a complex chronological and contextual process. Reflexivity does not silence the subjects' own voices or ways of expressing themselves. The researcher's questions thus come closer to the way the subjects understand their everyday lives.

### *Basic research of social work in the spirit of constructionism*

In the spirit of basic research, Arja Jokinen and Eero Suoninen (1999, in this book) approach social work from the starting-point of everyday practices. According to them, social work is constructed precisely within these practices. Their research focuses on the encounter between the social worker and the client. One of the most important tools in the professional encounter is conversation, a process of dialogue aimed at producing an interpretation of the client's situation. When applied to the study of social work, the ideas of social constructionism imply that linguistic practices be conceptualised as the interpretation of social reality and the construction of meanings.

In their research, Jokinen and Suoninen attempt to reach the interpretation of the client's situation through the process of the encounter. Here, they adapt the reference frame of social constructionism and discourse analysis in analysing how meanings evolve and take shape in face to face encounters between social workers and clients. Their aim is to examine the everyday practices of social work through the agents' perceptions and understanding of event. They place special emphasis on the essentiality of the conversation process in the production of narratives. They concentrate on the building of narratives at the scene of construction, in the dialogue between individuals, but in a way in which the narratives are simultaneously representative of real life and a manuscript for the future, a vision of possible life. Suoninen and Jokinen also pay attention to the fact that the power of narratives is connected to one of the potentials of social work: the joint creation of new narratives by the social worker and the client, which create broader visions of a future worth living.

Surprisingly, the essence of social work appears to be located in its most common everyday practices and in basic encounters with clients. In their research, Tarja Pösö and Kirsi Juhila (1999, in this book) have

concentrated on the most common aspects of social work. Namely, they have produced a detailed analysis of social work practices in situations in which the forms of work seem to be strictly determined by external norms. Pösö and Juhila examine client interviews which aim at the assessment of offenders' suitability for community service. The emphasis of their work is on the linguistic aspects of interaction, on the social construction of reality through language. On the other hand, through the use of ethnomethodological methods, they concentrate on the everyday and operational structures of social work routines and activities. They do so by utilising discourse analysis in the examination of the structures of verbal interaction, and ethnographic means in examining the operational cultures created by interaction. In this complex research process, which included a wide variety of material, the researchers have succeeded in increasing their interpretive competency, and have also become privy to 'insider' information. Thus, they have visualised the interpretive nature of social work. These processes of interpretation can be regarded as the existence of different local cultures even within very similar external forms of everyday work. These local cultures can be regarded as a proof of social work's interpretive potential and the opportunities it offers for diversity: the cultures exhibited not only an individual element that varied from one situation to the next, but also habits and customs that were shared among colleagues and collectivities. This adaptation of constructionist and ethnomethodological research methods is an example of locating speciality and contextuality. The methodological solutions proposed here do not necessarily imply the creation of new research methods, but rather more or less refer to the creative use of existing ones. (see Lyon & Bushfield 1996).

### *The structures and actors of social work*

The significance and impact of a social worker's thinking and individual agency can also be found in broader contexts. Both the roles of the social worker and the local cultures have potential significance as the constructors of operational frames, as the entire politics of welfare. In his research concerning the construction of welfare politics, Teppo Kröger (1999, in this book) has highlighted the agents operating on both the regional and local levels. His methodological approach is based



on his adoption of an historical case study. Here case study is defined as distinctly including those research projects which attempt to holistically explain the dynamics of a certain historical period of a particular social unit. Kröger's perspective is that local case studies of the history of social care could also provide good grounds for the discussion of critically prevalent welfare state theories; to commend, develop or question them. This is an interesting aspect of Finnish social work research at the present stage transitional phase, as the majority of professional social work is still done within local social service departments. The responsibilities of Finnish social welfare offices include miscellaneous chores, a great number of which are related to the provision of social care. Professionally educated social workers have been the key figures of locally provided social services in Finland, as in addition to practising their own profession within welfare bureaucracies, they have also been responsible for the management of social service departments. Thus, it is precisely social workers that have been in charge of the creation and reformation of the social care system at the local level. This close and multi-dimensional connection between the professional and the entire local welfare sector implies that their histories are also closely interrelated.

The perspectives of the social worker and the subject, and their joint experience as significant sources of knowledge have been central in Anna Metteri's (1999, in this book) research. In her own experience as a social worker she has often experienced a sense that she lacked the means to interfere in matters which she understood, and about which she had expertise or at least intuitive doubts. On the other hand, she did not possess a language or concepts with which to defend her own expertise either. When beginning her research work, she also attempted to somehow better understand the facts of which she felt that she had insufficient understanding in her earlier role as a social worker. She describes her research material as a kind of theoretical sampling for researching the questions that have arisen in professional activity. Her research concerns those individuals who have fallen between the cracks of working life and the pension system as a result of receiving a negative decision in their pension applications. This kind of research can be considered as centring on poverty and marginalisation. On the other hand, it is a concrete example of something which people are generally unenthusiastic about discussing, and which has been viewed as taboo.

It is a matter which was kept in silence and about which the social worker had information that varied quite distinctly from that which the logic of institutional decision-making could take into account. The breaking of this culture of silence, giving a voice to both the client and the social worker, became Metteri's research motivation. Her study required the selection of a method with which she would be able to get in touch with the relationship between human experience and institutional logic, between institutional conditions and human action.

Metteri's methodological choice and way of analysis has been a constructionist application of grounded theory. She examines the multi-professional definition and interpretation of the "falling-in-between" situation and the everyday coping of an individual in the discussions between clients and professionals, the discourse of professionals, as well as in client's own narration to various people. In her standpoint as a researcher she has had the same listening attitude as have the social workers. In her opinion, the ideas of grounded theory as a research process include the same kind of material as in the working process of a reflexive social worker. The testing character of grounded theory, which builds up hypotheses and interpretations from material to material, is also analogous to the working process of social work. As one of her methodological solutions, Metteri has consciously attempted not to divorce her experiences as a social worker in her capacity as a researcher. One of her central goals is the location of the welfare subjects' – be they clients or social workers – actions and experiences in the creation of the structural-institutional frameworks of welfare systems (see Rodwell 1998).

In the spirit of Riessman (1994), the researchers of this book have attempted to create social work research that is based upon the empirical practice of social work. Their methodological solutions have also reflected research methods and approaches that will help them to capture social work in its most crucial everyday practices. Namely, the face-to-face encounters between the social worker and the client and/or the relationship between the social worker and client, the social worker and the institution and the operational system.

### *Acting subjects and textual practices*

One of the basic tasks of social work research is to capture the basic process in which social work is constructed. The recognition of this is extremely important in the post-modern era in which we live, as social workers are seen as flexibly constructing the practice and models of handling people's life situations, as opposed to merely applying given professional models and methods. Theory and practice can no longer be considered as separate fields of social work expertise. Mirja Satka (1999, in this book) takes the acting subjects' position as the perspective in her research on the history of Finnish social work. She is searching for a response to the contemporary challenge to the social sciences in general to build bridges which mediate over the traditional dichotomous split of theory and practice. Satka has adopted Dorothy E. Smith's (1990) theoretical and methodological frame of textual practices in her attempt to understand not only written doctrine, but also its practical consequences, as well as the social dynamics in which the discourses of social work had been assembled in history. Satka goes on to note that in the light of recent research, the acting subjects have become both important knowledge producers and reproducers, which may have been the case even previous to social theory's recognition of the transformative power of agency – hence, it is important to transcend the opposition between social theory and agency, and the opposition of theory and practice in social work. This transcendence can be facilitated through a comprehensive understanding of recent historical developments. According to Satka, this is also why we should strive towards methods that extend the reflexive turn in modern consciousness to the practice of social work research, allowing us all to respond to the changing social life.

### **Political dimensions of social work research**

The present phase of social work development is demanding not only an increase in the investment of research and provision of methods and models for innovation and evaluation, but also the inclusion of research as an integral part of practice developments. Although the developments of the 1980's were significant and representative of a

growing interest in the research of social work, the construction of effective research and teaching methods in social work research still lie ahead. One of the main challenges of social work practice will be to create both specialist expertise and basic services in an effective and flexible way within the frames of the reconstruction of the welfare state and the ever changing, contingent, post-modern world. The qualified social workers, the practitioners, will have a major role in this process, in which close and co-operative relationships between practitioners, management, clients and researchers will emerge. In Finland, plans are under way to develop university teaching centres for social work, which would be geared towards research and innovation consortiums of social work expertise (Satka & Karvinen 1999, 123-124). There will be a wide variety of interests within this field, however it still offers promising opportunities for the development of social work research and practice.

### *The field of social work research politics*

In his analysis and research on social work knowledge bases and theories, professor Malcolm Payne (1997, 1-25) has stated, leaning towards a constructionist view of social development, that the formation of social work theory is political in nature. Consequently, even the theoretical models of social work include this political dimension; theory is politics. In fact, according to Hammersley (1995, 101-118), one could say that social research is inseparable from political dimensions; research is politics. In order to understand the tense and political nature of knowledge and research, one must analyse them in the context and processes in which they are produced and consumed. The politics of social work research is part of the professional system in the social field. It proves to be an interesting field of tensions in the combination of professional practises, professional agents, the traditions of science, research and theory, institutional solutions and normative standards of decision making and professional competition, i.e. the construction of the professional field. I have adapted a model of the general structure of human activity developed by Yrjö Engeström (1987) in order to analyse these tensions of social work research.

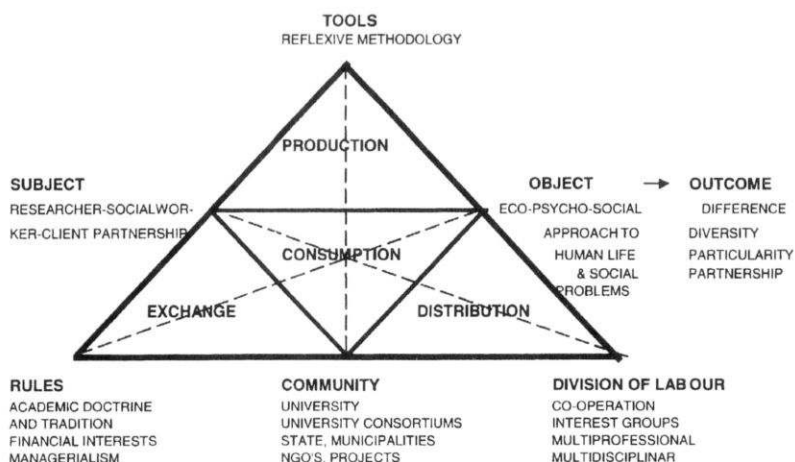


Figure 1 THE BASIC ACTIVITY SYSTEM (see Engeström 1987) ADAPTED AS THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH POLITICS

By means of this framework, at least some important questions can be introduced. Firstly, if we examine the basic processes (production, consumption, exchange and distribution) which create the system, it is essential to ask: What is being produced? Knowledge concerning what? How and on whose initiative? What is being consumed? In what way does the produced knowledge define/change the position and operation of the participants? What are the researchers able to offer in exchange? What will the terms of the research be? Accordingly, the area of distribution is also of great interest. What kind of interest groups move in the field, and how and why is co-operation constructed or fails to be constructed? It is obvious that many different views will be uncovered, inside which will exist various kinds of conflicts. The analysis of these conflicts also helps to locate the direction and possibilities of the desired development.

Through the activity system model in question I shall attempt to locate some trends which, in the light of some of the latest discussions, would appear to characterise the basic questions, directions and tensions in social work research. My location is preliminary, and a deeper analysis would be an objective of a broader research project. In the case of social work and social work research, the basic question of human action is of course the understanding and construction of the

object of one's action. There is very clear insight and know how in social work regarding the object. Social work deals with questions of human life through the adoption an eco-social standpoint (e.g. Meyer & Mattaini 1995), which I prefer to refer to as an eco-psycho-social standpoint. By utilising this approach it is possible to go beyond individualism to the horizon of social structures and processes, without losing sight of the human subject. As Jan Fook (1996, 198) says the reflexive research is "adding to this context of 'person in situation' complex dimensions by emphasising the importance of not only of context, but of multiple and changing contexts in interpreting situations, influencing subjectivity, and affecting power relations." She also emphasises the importance of human experience and alternative ways of knowing.

Riitta Granfelt's doctoral dissertation, 'Stories About Women's Homelessness', provides an excellent example of this kind of approach, and is also an exceptional example of social work research. The objects of the study are social marginalisation and displacement on the one hand, and the related unique humane destinies and encounters on the other. As Granfelt (1998, 177) writes: "In my opinion, the ethics of social work becomes true and most beautiful in the everyday sharing of helplessness, guilt and suffering." Social work as a social political activity has little value if social workers lack the courage to advocate on behalf of individuals who are unable to defend their right to live a different kind of life, and the possibility to receive support in finding one's own way of life in a situation in which one has been faced with significant losses. The clients of social workers utilising such approaches valued them highly, as their concerns were taken seriously, their feelings and thoughts were considered relevant, and there was an absolute lack of morality, accusation and contemptuous 'normalisation' of life.

In my opinion, Riitta Granfelt's writing concretely and touchingly deals with the dilemmas and options of post-modern social work; at its best social work allows for diversity, creates possibilities and is versatile and flexible. This flexibility and diversity can be considered as examples of the qualities that will play a crucial role in the social services of a post-modern society, even when efficiency and productivity are called into question. In the definition of the context and object of social work, social reality and problems, one must simultaneously be

especially sensitive and possess a good sense of one's own action as a social worker in order for such a reflection to be possible.

### *Some remarks on methodological tensions*

Social work research must solve many methodological problems. Its challenge is to reach, understand and visualise its object, the client's changing life and the multiplicity of the professional practices in their eco-social contexts. This multiplicity and indefiniteness, which is acceptable according to the post-modern way of thinking, has previously been seen as burdensome in social work's scientific research and theory formation. Social work's reflective tradition will become legitimated in post-modern interpretations. One could even speak about a kind of epistemological necessity for 'reflexive realism' (Delanty 1997, 133), when it is considered that reality is constructed by social actors, subjective interpretations and points of view of what counts as knowledge. In this way the field of research becomes multidimensional; when the character and realisation of practise vary and change, the ethic-political dimensions of the research-practise relationship will also be renewed. As opposed to vertical hierarchies of scientific authority, a horizontal structure will be necessary, which in this case implies the reconstruction of the client-citizen, social worker-expert and researcher-expert relationships, which also concerns the production of knowledge and epistemological standpoints. This hybrid model of knowledge production will be elevated to the side of the traditional faculty based model, and new kinds of reciprocal relationships between science and the surrounding society will be born. A horizontal expertise, the social worker-client-researcher-partnership, will become increasingly significant on the side of authority which is directed from top to bottom. (Gibbons 1994; also, McCartt & Mullen 1995; Mutka 1998).

However, these developments will also bring the central problems into light: What is being examined? Why is it being examined? How is it being examined? And who is examining it? These questions also raise the importance of the role of the practitioner in the process of knowledge production. As Liz Lloyd (1998, 724) concludes: "Social workers should perceive a role for themselves in facilitating communication between users, communities and social services departments in

the process of developing communities and social services.”

The definition of the research object is a profound methodological and even epistemological question. From what kind of knowledge and in what way do we really wish to have been able to produce, or to be able to produce in the future, and what do we need in order to do so? In social work we deal with the problem of shared, combined knowledge (see e.g. Granfelt in this book) in many respects. Combined knowledge concerns knowledge and experience which is constructed by the subjects of social work processes (e. g. clients, social workers and other professionals in the co-operational networks) in the different fields of practice, and which they should be able to share in order to understand the common object of their work. Producing this kind of knowledge demands reflexive methodology, methodology in which the essence of knowledge is recognised as interpretive and socially constructed. We can speak about both “epistemological reflexivity” (Delanty 1998; Scheurich 1997; Sheppard 1998; White 1997) and “standpoint epistemology” (Connolly 1996). It is exactly this standpoint – this point of view – which introduces the question of how the position of a researcher as a producer of knowledge is in fact also an epistemological question, and especially a political question (Liddle 1996, 173). On epistemological grounds, this standpoint would also call for the establishment of an autonomous field of research for social work. The “who examines?” question is thus very important in social work. It is an especially contemporary question in Finland, where we are now making efforts to stabilise social work’s own scientific community. (Satka & Karvinen 1999).

The questions of what is examined and why it is examined cannot be separated from each other, and an ethic-political tension is inherent in them, which is the very nature of social politics and social work (Jones & Jordan 1996, 261). In this sense, the knowledge and research of social work always implies a kind of strategic-political dimension. In the professional discourse of social work and social policy, this is discussed through the concept of empowerment. (Leonard 1998, 11, 165.) This by no means calls for a politically based production of knowledge, but rather for flexibility, which makes the construction of different voices and points of view possible. The point of view of the actors, the practitioners, will be important. As Martyn Jones and Bill Jordan (1996, 267) put it: “The real integration of theory and practice will



not come from a ponderous, rigid body of knowledge, but, from the humility to learn from practitioners' experiences." When examining and pondering the expertise of social work – the possibilities of gaining knowledge and applying it – we are continuously faced with its practice bound, reflexive nature. In many senses, nothing in social work expertise can be taken for granted, rather, it calls for creativity and reflexivity (Fook & Ryan & Hawkins 1997). The importance of experiential learning and the demands on creativity are a major challenge in research methodology, too (Lyon & Bushfield 1996).

## Methodological and political challenges

Reflexivity will open up new opportunities for developing and creating different methodological approaches. One could speak, in the epistemological sense, about "a creative paradigm" (Peile & McCouat 1997, 347), according to which reality can be seen as being in a creative process of unfolding, in which everything is a different manifestation of a whole. In this creative approach, theorising, practice and research would all be inseparable aspects of the same creative process. However, this is almost a paradoxical challenge for social work research. The problem is not so much one of the lack of creative visions as of the lack of methodological rigour (Padgett 1998, 20). The way towards methodological pluralism should be paved both with solid rigour and searching for new, reflexive, solutions. In any case, the question will be about creating such research paradigms in which the subjects of the enquiry, the researcher and researched, will be acknowledged as subjects of both the knowledge and their lives. (Lyon & Bushfield 1996.) In social work this means striving towards such scholarly communities and research programmes that could also create a forum for open and reflexive partnership of actors in the field.

One can see several significant reasons for the importance of emphasising the practice-research relationship in social work research:

- 1) A very up to date theme is the concern of social constructionism (Jokinen & Juhila & Pösö 1999) and/or social constructivism (Delanty 1997, Rodwell 1999, 42-46) on the interpretative nature of social work practices and the processes the processes in which

everyday moral order is produced locally and temporally. Thus, the research process shall include the shared reflection between researchers and practitioners as an essential part of the research process itself – i.e. as a research methodological solution.

- 2) The second fact is that the social workers will have to gain reliability in the evaluation and articulation of their own work. In fact, they will have to go even further by including their clients in this process of knowledge production (McCartt & Mullen 1995). Anna Metteri (1999) has found this to be the most central dimension in breaking the culture of silence in social work. If our aim is to remain loyal to the needs of our clients, we must learn to articulate the professional experience and find ways to show the reliability of this kind of expertise in the multi-professional contexts of social work.
- 3) Small-scale projects and separate experiments will increasingly become rules as opposed to exceptions in the creation of reflexive practices, and there will also be a need for systematic and realistic evaluation. These projects will grow into a real flow of creative professional expertise, if the space for researching practitioners and a new kind of researcher–practitioner partnership can be established.
- 4) The need for basic research in social work is emergent. The efforts of making everyday life and practices visible in social work research are now approaching the formation of a kind of basic research approach of social work research. In this approach, the researcher no longer merely takes the externally objective position of describing and explaining who the clients of social work are and what social work is, but rather highlights the basic logic and essence of professional social work practices through the agents' experience and activity. Here, one faces the demands of plurality, creativity and critical reflexivity in both research and practice. This kind of multiplicity and flexibility is typical of what is analogously referred to as the "archaeology" of post-modern methodology (Scheurich 1997, 174-175). This kind of an idea of basic research calls for creative and pluralistic solutions in research methodology, which, according to Scheurich (*ibid.*), is the nature of the post-modern field of research.

On the one hand, as far as the politics of research is concerned, this will imply facilitating small projects and experiments. This might sound

self-evident or at least acceptable, although it is not so. In fact it is not like that at all, but the threshold from practice to the evaluation and articulation of one's own work is still high. On the other hand, broad projects allowing for long-term basic research and methodological development are also needed. There are a wide range of approaches and methods in research, which according to today's thinking are welcomed for integration and triangulation in the research process. On the other hand, the methodological choices and the assumptions about the character of reality, knowledge and the social power controlling them are of a very basic character. One could even speak about the politics of methodology (see Hammersley 1995; also Connolly 1996, 186-197.) The seeds of reflexive politics can be seen, and hopefully university consortiums for social work research and development in Finland will be able to organise collective research projects and forums in the future, so that a genuine dialogue between research, practice and citizens will flourish.

The task of the education and research of social work is to produce instruments and methods for professional reflexivity and the so-called discursive competency. The qualifications of a future social worker, emphasising alternative, temporal, local and culturally specific characteristics and citizen-centred participation, have a reflexive, discursive and communicative, interpretative and understanding character (Karvinen 1996; Mutka 1998). One of the great challenges of social work education and research is to create a basis for this development. It is important that such participatory and democratic research and teaching practices are developed as to allow for particularity, alternatives and opportunities for different interpretations in a citizen-centred manner. This is an especially methodological challenge to the research of social work.

## Note

- 1 The terms 'reflexive' and 'reflective' are in many contemporary discourses often used synonymously, but here 'reflection' is a concept used in learning theories and 'reflexive' refers mainly to sociological thinking (see also Karvinen 1996, 16).

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## Other SoPhi titles

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Synnöve Karvinen, Tarja Pösö & Mirja Satka (eds.)  
RECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH  
Finnish Methodological Adaptations

The 1990s has been a decade in which Finnish social work research has blossomed. The research has been searching for its identity in the "age of uncertainty", and has constructed the conditions for its development. It has not settled for merely observing occurrences, rather it has begun to de- and reconstruct its own subjects of research. It possesses characteristically strong aspirations, which aim at locating the specificity of the professional, interactive, as well as social and ethical aspects of social work.

This book offers a representative sample of social work research in Finland, which is specifically aimed at an international audience. The book illustrates the development and application of the research methodological solutions and innovations of ten social work researchers. In addition, it includes a chapter analysing the methodological tensions in current research.



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