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# **Actors, Texts, and Power in the History of Social Work**

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A paper for conference on "Post-modernism and social work"  
Ambleside, U.K., April 17-20, 1996.

## **Abstract**

This paper is an introduction to the approach and method that I have developed in a recent study which aim is to trace the conceptual and practical history of Finnish poor relief and social work during the period when they modernized, i.e. were transformed from a voluntary activity based on local knowledge into textually coordinated professions. When planning the study and choosing the approach, I wanted to work out a method which helps to overcome the contradictions between 'theory' and 'practice' in social work in interpreting its modernization. I believe that every epoch needs a new interpretation of history; an interpretation which begins from its own premises. Many consider our time post-modern. How do we need to understand the past now in order to be able to orient ourselves for the future, calls for micro-histories rather than the great, often marxistly flavored grand stories of the modern period. This time calls for reinterpretations of modernization which speak about real actors, who once lived and acted in a particular position, in particular social relations in which texts, discourses and specific facts were part of. This necessarily leads to many standpoints of analyzing and many 'truths' of the past.

## **On the premises**

The older I have become, the more I have had to learn different ways of talking, writing and acting as a social work expert. In recent years I have been learning to translate my expertise in social work into the language of markets. The market discourse is about the sixth new way of conceptualizing social work that has emerged during my career, and its implementation will have dramatic reorganizing effects on social work practices.

Still, I find it difficult to conceive of, for example, my relationship with the students of social work as a market relationship and my work as a production process in which a carefully profiled product called "social worker" is produced to be marketed to

employers. My British colleagues face similar difficulties: to them, the weekly measurement of the “student product“ is one of the everyday routines brought about by the market discourse. I assume that there is a common explanation to our problem: from the postwar period until today, social work has been organized in state-controlled *relations of ruling* that have been strongly coordinated by the idea of every citizen’s wellbeing and the belief in its usefulness for both national integration and economic growth.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that with the emergence of a new language and new practices, the old ones do not disappear. Instead, they coexist for a long time with the new ones, adapting to them and making the necessary concessions (cf. Matthies 1994). Every new approach constructs a particular type of social expert, including the expert identity, and the social relations in which the expertise is used. For example, in the market discourse this kind of an expert is the *case manager*, who individually plans, buys and monitors the production of services.

The conceptualized practice in which the novice social worker begins to participate constitutes an important personal point of departure. According to my observations, the identities constructed by the new conceptual practices are, in a way, sedimented on the old tradition and position themselves in relation to it. I began as a social worker in the service of a rapidly growing welfare state, and since then I have undergone several discursively structured professional identities – as have others who have followed the same path. Ultimately, the discursive reorientations that followed each other in an increasingly rapid succession made me think: What is this really all about? What is the essence of social work? What is my role in this turbulence? Why is it that social workers, always with a relative lack of preparation, have to learn a new language in which to conceptualize the substance of their work and to construct the essential interactive relationships on a new basis? I began to search for the answer in history. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of Finnish social work, to increase my historically constructed self-understanding, and to reorganize my sedimented discourses and identities. This was to be an essential ingredient in the development of my own expertise.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of relations of ruling has no particular theoretical intention. By *the relations of ruling* I mean forms of specialized and distinct organization and relations mediated by texts. They are characterized by a capacity to realize 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. People 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, 2-3, 212-214).

As a social worker and social scientist, I found it important to understand not only the written doctrine but also its practical consequences and the social context and dynamics in which it had been put together in history. As a social work academic I consider as 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". I was also aware that even a partial answer to my questions presupposed an analysis based on extra-doctrinal premises, transcending traditional history of ideas and the deconstruction of linguistic meanings. My goal was to analyze, from within, social work as a historically structured and conceptualized practice (see Satka 1988). Thus I do not share the nowadays so common epistemology of meaning. As a social work expert, who always thinks and works in close connection to people's changing everyday, I have to doubt that the mere understanding of lingual meanings would open up a new understanding of practices. I rather believe that both textual categories and action are not only closely connected but produced in one and same process of action. When beginning my study, my personal experience and understanding of how things work in social work pointed out that I should not separate the developments of knowledge from the ongoing processes of practice. Social work had always been more a matter of practices than a discipline or a field of scholars or spectacular discourses. At least in Finland it has borrowed its most important facts and truths from other disciplines, tested them in practice at first and when proved useful they have been written down into social work texts. Therefore, I consider the concepts and facts of social work (and knowledge in general) as an elementary aspect of practice that contribute the implementation of social control or social support.

Additionally, I find it important to figure out a method to write a history of knowledge that does not either reject the agency of individual actors or the power involved in textual forms of knowledge. In his late texts Michel Foucault (1982,222) himself was well aware of the problems that the study of different modes of objectification poses for the analysis of power relationships. In order to avoid explanations where power is explained by power (or the power of a discourse by the same discourse) he recommends that one should concentrate on specific institutions but anchoring the analysis of power relations outside the institution. He did not anchor his analysis on individuals. Instead he argues that individuals are undergoing and exercising power; they are circulated among the threads of power. But if one supports the "ontology of social" which sees individual actors capable as discursive agents (i.e. reproducers and transformers of knowledge) in the social relations (in interactions between people) of their everyday practice, these individuals become one possibility for the important point of anchorage outside the institution. (cf. Smith 1988; 1993). That is to me the method to connect the

different pieces of knowledge to particular time and social relations and ask: how did they co-operate in that concrete context and what was the practitioners' place and share in them?

### **Actors and practices in the research on social work**

In both Finnish and international research and theory on social work it has become customary to conceptualize its practices from the viewpoint of external theoretical premises, and to make a rigid distinction between theory and practice. Several scholars of social work have strongly argued that (the Scandinavian) “social work as professional practice and as a scientific discipline“ (e.g. Soydan 1993b, 204) must clarify its theoretical, methodological and societal role and identity by anchoring itself to the (international) development of social sciences, and especially to that part of them that have been historically concerned with social action (see also Soydan 1993a). Practices and actors are objects that social and behavioural sciences describe and analyze by means of theoretical concepts and applicable methods. The goal is universal and generalizable knowledge about the social phenomenon under investigation. A process of knowledge acquisition and interpretation thus constructed is, however, fatal from the standpoint of the living human beings. Their standpoint is transformed into that of theory, organization and control: real actors are replaced by concepts and administrative categories applying appropriate designations to them (cf. Pohjola 1994; Smith 1991, 161–167).

Thus, I disagree with these scholars on theory, but I share their view of history as an important mirror of professional self-understanding. I believe that our good understanding of history can contribute to constructing a picture of a post-modern practitioner consciously acting over the break that the social and material reality and the texts thematizing it create (Satka 1988). However, this does not happen if the picture of the past is only reconstructed from the objectified forms of knowledge cut off from their practical context and uses. If we, social work researchers, want to advance critical reflection in our field, we need to find methods of exploration that do not fall into the objectifying mode in which we work. We need to look for a method of inquiry where the inquiry itself is a critique of socially organized practices of knowing. Therefore, it is essential to search for a method that helps reconstruct the post-professional identity from the past until today, a method that is sensitive to both the history of ideas and local practices.

In the referred study of modern social work I am particularly concerned with the active ways in which particular texts started to organize people's relations, and how that organizing was shaped in time and from debate to debate in the context of the developing relations of ruling. Empirically, I aim to discover the formation of the conceptual (and practical) history of Finnish social intervention over the period of time when 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 textually coordinated international forms of functioning. I am reconstructing the way the then authors were writing and reading the texts in the social contexts of their daily lives, and I am asking what were the restructuring effects in the context of the modern relations of ruling which followed from their everyday practices and from the institution that started as poor relief. My assumption is that disciplinary and administrative texts are crucially important mediums of institutional action, communication, and shared consciousness. Thus, the above-described method of interpreting<sup>2</sup> the texts (that I have nominated materialist method) related to Finnish social intervention approaches these texts as active contributors to the institutional processes of development (cf. Smith 1990b, 45-57).

The study draws from the social theory developed by Dorothy Smith (e.g. 1988; 1990a; 1990b), 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 is social relationships organized by texts (therapeutic, market, and network relations), practices, and a specific professional consciousness. I found especially useful her theoretical and methodological ways of making visible this essential dimension of modern social control: power mediated in texts and theories, producing relations of ruling that organize modern institutions, standardizing their function as well as actors' awareness and self-understanding.

One essential concept of the introduced approach is the concept of *conceptual practice*, and the methodological gaze that follows. Conceptual practices belong to the elementary processes of modern ruling (e.g. Smith 1990b, 83-104; Smith 1990a, 212-

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy E. Smith borrows theoretical, methodological and ontological tools from Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' historical materialism in *German Ideology* (1970), and the idea of text as a constituent of social relations originates from the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel. The foundation of her method is materialist ontology, which emphasizes the importance of exploring the actual practices of actual individuals as socially co-ordinated and co-ordered practices. This co-ordination is mediated by texts and documents of various kinds. Smith expands the terrain of the original method to cover both the social relations of knowledge and forms of consciousness in the social institutions. (see Smith 1988, 133135; Smith 1990a, 68, 9297).

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 (professionals, volunteers, common people, etc.) in time and place. It follows that the ways in which the concept manifests itself in the following are many. I have analyzed the conceptual practices, for example, as integral to institutional ideology, individual consciousness, and the professional mode of intervention.

An important ontological move follows from adopting this method of analyzing texts as active contributors in the relations of ruling. The method avoids reproducing the traditional theoretical and methodological split of social work into theory and practice. Thus, in my approach reading a text, for example, brings the reader into an active relation with the discourse or another organization mediated by the text, such as the order of an administration; it means entering a mode of knowing with others, and sharing with them a mode of knowing. Thus, if the text is activated by a competent reader, the structuring effects of the text are to put into practice.

"We move away then from the conception of the text based on our apprehension as readers, that treats the text before us as a source of meaning to be, in a sense, lifted off the page", Smith (1991, 159) writes. She goes on to compare the operation of the structuring effects of texts 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 organizes what happens next. According to Smith (1991, 160), texts make magic things possible; that is, a text "put into practice" makes meanings and relations appear that could never occur in events where texts play no major role.

The interpretive practices of the researcher are also always 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 do (e.g. as abstracted norms of normative structures held to link positions or roles). In her work social relations refer to an organization 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.) That is also the mode in which the often vague concept of social relations appears in this study.

From the methodological approach illustrated above, it follows that I do not investigate the selected texts as sources of linguistic meanings (e.g. Riley 1988; Scott 1988) or tacit powers (e.g. Foucault 1986). Thus, an essential difference between my project and the above-mentioned ones is, first, that I am neither a historian nor a philosopher but a social scientist, and second, that I am personally deeply involved in the substance of my study. From that standpoint I have chosen to analyze the texts as a part of the socially organized and organizing practices, and to struggle for a reflexive method of writing a history of intellectual development that rejects neither the agency of individual actors nor the power of texts. This has led me to anchor the following analysis outside and beyond institutions (cf. Foucault 1982, 222), to the discursive agents who in the various institutional contexts participated in the making of the analyzed texts. Locating the authors in the local social relations of their daily practices and in the extended relations of their time, enables me to reconstruct and reinterpret the processes of selecting, evaluating and articulating in which they were involved in producing their texts. Actually, that has given me an opportunity to get a vivid picture of knowledge in practice, that is, to understand something of the development of social work knowledge in the social relations of actual actors, local and national government, state formation, professional powers, and institutional ideologies.

### **The historiographical context of the study**

I undertook to apply the above-described approach into original sources connected with doctrinal issues, social history, and the history of ideas from the 1870s onwards. At that time began a powerful unification and institutionalization of social work through legal documents and other administrative texts. I analyze the changes in conceptual practices from the viewpoint of the developers of the doctrine as well as those relations of ruling in which doctrinal and practical changes took place until the end of the 1950s. This is the decade when the final signs of modern times emerged in the social field: the bureaucratic agency called social welfare and two professions competing with each other: municipal welfare workers and clinical social workers. In addition, the 1950s is a decade when the traditional and modern order met and were driven into a conflict that the contemporaries called “the dispute over method“. Thus, my analysis covers a period of transition from local, premodern support arrangements of the agricultural society into nationally and to some extent even internationally uniform occupational practices coordinated by texts and doctrines.



My treatise can be regarded as the first comprehensive analysis of the initial stages of the doctrinal and practical modernization of Finnish social work, both voluntary and professional. It draws, via carefully focused case studies of the pioneers in the field, a picture of the ways in which the consciousness, texts and practices of social workers were shaped in the contemporary society, in its developing relations of ruling. In relation to earlier Finnish or international studies of the social history or the history of ideas of social welfare or social work, my analysis is different in at least two respects.

First, I have shown how local practices started to be unified by means of different texts during the days of relief work. The decisive invention was the *form*, the latest and most efficient manifestations of which can be found in the field of automatic data processing. In being generalized, the form standardized the documentation of the poor people's need of help as well as what was documented on the basis of home inspections. The more complex the practice-organizing 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 of development. Movement from everyday life to the exact interpretation presupposed by the legal discourse could no longer be based on the use of forms. The establishment of the control state required a discursively competent welfare worker, who had to be educated in the interpretation of law outside the local community.

The second new opening of my treatise concerns the tracing of the doctrine and practices of social work in the development of the concrete and historical relations of ruling in an individual country. I describe in detail those social relations in which the poor, the deviant, and social workers have encountered each other in different periods. This 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 characterized by sisterhood and brotherhood designed to maintain friendly class relations, the goals of which were defined by the better-off party. After the Civil War, when the class relations were filled with suspicion and bitterness, direct state control was introduced into the relationship between shepherds and the poor. The reports on the inspections of Red orphans' homes went straight into the Ministry of Social Affairs. 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 life, in the nuclear family, and in individuals who adjusted to modern society and could

support themselves, and started 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.

My study shows that 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 class relations and the gender order (which I have also analyzed). As early as the 19th century it became clear that the welfare officials could not organize 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 shepherds rose and shepherding 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 men's task and 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. Women's task was to apply concepts and forms to practices that were described by feminine attributes. From the logic of the developing relations of ruling it followed that the practical actors – the poor or the shepherds – were not regarded as carriers of relevant knowledge. The texts of the social service field did not deal with the knowledge of the actors on the grassroots level; in the prevailing discourse this knowledge was considered irrelevant.

### **Summa Summarum**

The title of my treatise "*Making social citizenship*" summarizes 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 has been the entire nation's wellbeing and the state's success. This conclusion can also be made on the basis of the picture research has drawn of the state-centricity of the Finnish relations of ruling. When one further

takes into account the moral ideal of a Finnish citizen, formed at the turn of the century, with its emphasis on the primacy of the people over the individual, it becomes difficult to share the interpretation of some researchers (e.g. Heinonen 1984; Arnkil 1993) that the “plot“ underlying social work was the control and reproduction of labour force. Naturally, such interpretations are valid in societies where the relations of ruling are organized around the economy, e.g. developing national capitalism. Nor does the individualization of the needy (Eräsaari 1991) as a function of social work take precedence over the ideal of a good citizen. Rather, individualization is one dimension in the making of a modern citizen. The order of individualization and the creation of a social and moral citizen may be different in societies organized around the liberalist concept of citizenship, in which the individual subject is primary *vis-à-vis* the state. This has not been the case in Finland (e.g. Pulkkinen 1987).

The results of my study show that 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 changing practices and social relations that written doctrines and discourses increasingly direct** in the course of modernization.

After discovering and making visible to myself how social work really is an activity affected by the relations of ruling, I am convinced that the conceptual practices of social work do not consist of two crucially different elements of theory and practice but rather form a continuum with two poles. This standpoint explodes a good deal of the contemporary theorizing about social work and raises the question about its theorizing in general. The method of analyzing conceptual practices worked well in the referred study, but I am aware that this is only one effort to overcome the epistemological split that has for a long time disturbed me and many other researchers in the field.

Every historical stage transformed by the relations of ruling has put the actors in the field face to face with great uncertainty. In the light of history, the reform of the welfare state project appears to be a turning point that requires the introduction of new discursive coordinates into social work. I hope that a time has arrived when they could be written also from the viewpoint of the citizen, the voluntary helper and the social worker, and that the tacit knowledge of the actors on the grassroots level could finally be made public.

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