

Peeping at peers

A cross-national study of professionalism in social work

‘Comparative studies of social work are a neglected field, but demands for them are increasing’

These were the opening words of an interesting article by Anne Meeuwisse and Hans Swärd which was published in an earlier issue of this journal (Meeuwisse and Swärd 2007). In their article, Meeuwisse and Swärd discuss three ways of making cross-national comparisons of social work. These ways are comparisons based on models of social policy, profession-orientated comparisons and practice-orientated comparisons. Generally, these three ways of comparisons move from a macro-level to a micro-level and all three ways have their own strengths and weaknesses. Since the subject of my Ph.D. study happens to be a cross-national comparative study of social work, I considered it insightful and relevant to illustrate my own research plan here. The aim in doing so is twofold. First, to contribute to the field of comparative studies of social work, which is a neglected field indeed. Second, it is my hope that this article will yield useful reactions from readers. .

Introduction: Social Work: ‘The dog that didn’t bark’ (Jordan and Jordan 2000)

Contemporary social work is subjected to ongoing questions in terms of its effectiveness and accountability. Public authorities, such as local governments and insurance companies, are developing a context in which the efforts and results established by professionals can objectively be measured and allocated to the various areas of social work. The social work sector, unable to defend itself and its work thus forms an easy prey for cutbacks (Lans, Medema et al. 2003).

It appears to be problematic for social workers to defend themselves in a proper manner. When they do so, they often seem to rely ‘primarily on a rhetoric of good intentions’ and are thus unable to constructively assess the underlying principles of their work (Freidson 2001: 3). This lack of proper legitimization raises the question as to whether these principles – i.e. an evidence-based body of knowledge – are actually relevant; one can argue that social work fails to present itself as a genuine *profession*. The term profession is derived here from Freidson’s theory on professionalism. In his magnum opus *Professionalism: the third logic*, he develops three ideal-types of institutional circumstances related to work organization in society: ‘market’, ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘professionalism’ (2001). To begin with ‘market’; this would be the situation in which consumers are free without limits to select and purchase the goods (including care and welfare) of their own choices. There are no limitations in prices or skills in this ideal-type; the well-informed consumer is considered clever enough to rationally argue as to which products from which institutions are acceptable at which prices. Bureaucracy, then, refers to the situation in which entire organizations, both private firms and public agencies, are managed according to a set of rules and restrictions formulated and implemented by a relatively few number of high-ranked officials within these organizations. Planning here is based on efficiency, aiming at predictability and transparency. Professionalism, finally, refers to the situation in which the workers themselves are in possession of the specialized knowledge that is

required for their work, are in possession of the discretionary power (see also Lipsky 1980) to organize their own conditions of work, as opposed to merely being puppets subjected to the will of consumers or managers.

Considering the aforementioned decline of public trust in the social sector, the call for a firm body of knowledge increases. A firm body of knowledge then, preferably developed from within the social sector, may help this sector to effectively respond to the challenges mentioned above, instead of being the subject of major cutbacks. Furthermore, and equally important, it is assumed a body of knowledge thus developed will enhance the actual quality of the work delivered by the social workers. This body of knowledge is likely to increase in its firmness when international developments are included during its construction, and would then provide an increasing uniformity of the actual methods of professionals. Due to the question of professionalism which the sector is currently dealing with, this uniformity appears to be relevant and desirable. But is this uniformity indeed possible, let alone desirable?

Research outline

These considerations have prompted my doctoral research, which began in May 2007, and will take approximately four years to complete. The literature study so far has led to the following research questions: How can the social work sector professionalize itself, (re-)establish its status as a profession and legitimize both its work and its existence towards the public opinion and of policy makers and scientists? And, how and to what extent are these developments related to rationality and the dynamics of large scale numbers i.e. evidence-based practice (Sackett, Straus et al. 2000; Morego 2007), discretionary judgments and professionalism (Protas 1979; Lipsky 1980; Freidson 2001; Riccucci 2005) and dynamics concerning the (transnational) import and export of innovations (Rogers 2003; Fleuren, Wiefferink et al. 2004)?

The design of this research can be regarded as a replicate of the study *Success and Failure in Public Governance* (Bovens, Hart et al. 2001). The authors of this book observed that contemporary (local) governments are confronted with similar problems, and they were interested in the various ways these problems were addressed in these different countries. The question that drove them was whether governments as we know it serve well, or not, and if any kind of prediction can be done about the successfulness of governments. Their research design is a cross-national comparison which interweaves four governmental challenges (the decline of the steel industry, the reform of health care systems, financial regulation and the crisis of the HIV-epidemic) across six countries (France, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). This design was chosen to answer questions such as ‘why are certain policies successful, while others, in the same sector or same countries fail?’ and ‘is it possible to formulate certain dynamics behind these – apparently coincidental – differences?’

These questions are the link between *Success and Failure in Public Governance* and the underlying research, since this last one will scrutinize social workers in different countries who are confronted with similar social problems. The design of this study is, then, to interweave a selection of social problems across the cities of Eindhoven, Antwerp and Cologne. Bovens et. al. were interested in relevant dynamics concerning public governance; we are interested in relevant dynamics concerning social work.

The choice for this transnational design thus originated from the wish to evaluate the ‘robustness’ of the scientific bases underlying contemporary social work versus the diversities generated from specific situations in different countries. The question is then which one will turn out to be more significant when it comes to the foundations of social work practice: scientific evidence-based innovations, or the mere coincidences of the different, day-to-day situations in different cities.

Suggested methodology

When placed in the perspective outlined by Meeuwisse and Swärd, my research takes place at the level of practice-orientated comparisons. As a method for this type of comparisons, that is, as a means of investigating what actually happens at the practices of social workers the authors introduce the ‘vignette method’ (Meeuwisse and Swärd 2007: 491-493). This method confronts social workers (individually, or in focus groups) with hypothetical but realistic examples of client situations. The social workers are asked how they would react when confronted with these cases in real-life. It is also possible, and common, to focus on one client, in different stages of his or her ‘care career’. An example of this last form could be (Khoo 2004):

Vignette 1: *Early in the school year, a teacher calls the social service agency about John, a 7-year-old boy. John had been coming to school complaining of being tired and hungry. He reported that his mother did not have breakfast for him. When questioned, he added that his mother was asleep on the sofa; he dressed himself and walked to school.*

Vignette 2: *Some months later, the agency gets another call about the same family. A neighbour reported hearing screaming coming from the home. She witnessed the child leave the home, a male yelling obscenities at the child, and holding the child tightly. Beer bottles were lying outside the front door. The mother was present and passively observing what was going on.*

Vignette 3: *Two months later, the schoolteacher telephoned the social service agency again to report first that the child had discomfort sitting down. The child raised his shirt and revealed multiple bruise marks on his back in the shape of a strap. The child appeared afraid and stated that he would be in trouble for showing his teacher.*

The variations of the reactions of social workers are then analysed, making it possible to actually scrutinize how different social workers (in different countries) react on similar situations. Soydan (1996) used vignettes similar with these to compare social workers in Sweden with their peers in the United Kingdom. Two of the main conclusions were that Swedish social workers tend to act in an earlier stage than their English colleagues, and usually focused on the family as the principal client, whereas the English social workers focused on the child (Soydan, in Hantrais and Mangel 1996: 120-128).

It is my aim to confront social workers with fictional but plausible situations which they are also likely to encounter during their daily practices. Four themes with which social workers are confronted have already been selected. These themes are:

- People with severe and chronic debts;
- 'Noisy neighbors'; anti-social behavior;
- Domestic violence;
- Homeless young people.

For each theme, a series of vignettes will be designed. Early versions of these vignettes are already being presented to social work students, in order to increase the empirical value, but also the reliability and creditability of these vignettes. The feedback of these students will be used to improve the vignettes. These vignettes will then be presented to social workers in the three different cities.

However, this method appears to have one major pitfall: it does not investigate what social workers actually do, but merely what they argue what they would do, or say they would do, given a certain situation. There may be a bias caused by socially desirable responses. This problem may be reduced by a follow-up of focus-groups and/or semi-structured interviews. In focus-groups, respondents are confronted with the views of their peers, that may challenge their own views; and argumentations on these views are thus likely. This process will encourage more realistic and reliable outcomes. Interviews could be useful here because the interviewees will probably show less reactive effects. These effects can cause a bias in focus groups. Furthermore, the motives, beliefs and views of single interviewees can be intensively scrutinized when using the method of semi-structured interviews.

Relevance

This study centers upon the core of professional innovation, by investigating the meaning of scientific rationality and other factors concerned with the diffusion and embedding of professional practices as formulated by Freidson (2001). As such, it forms an exploration as to which dynamics are relevant in the construction and the maintenance of an international body of knowledge of modern social work. Such a body of knowledge may help the social sector in its justification towards the society and, equally important, towards its funding agency's. There are claims that the status praxis of social workers are actually *not* evidence-based. Moreover, the professional identity of these social workers appears to be problematic; they are said not to actually share a firm, grounded, body of knowledge, or a specific, well-defined area of expertise.

To summarize, if it can be concluded as a result of the underlying research that there actually appears a certain uniformity in the approaches in the three cities, and that this uniformity is based on internationally shared 'hard' knowledge, then one has at least a point – however modest this point may be – when trying to establish social work as a profession. And this is interesting with regard to Freidson's third logic as mentioned before. Being a profession, as opposed to merely being a 'craft' (2001: 88-93), social work could make a grounded claim on important aspects which would enhance the status and the autonomy of the social work sector. The training of credentialed social workers would be one of the most important ones of these aspects.

Personal information

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