

Multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach in Social work Education and its Implications

Nol Reverda

The Dutch Journal of the Social Sector, which used to be the Journal of Social Work, focused recently in a special issue on the introduction of methods in the Netherlands, developed abroad. Caring communities, mother centres, highscope, homeless newspaper, homestart, families first, and youth at risk are all introduced in the Dutch social scene, indicating the ongoing internationalisation of the social professional practice. After reading the interesting contributions, I couldn't help but wonder, what type of social professional could be interested in these topics, and which professional could claim the respective domains of expertise and intervention: social workers, social pedagogues, lawyers, community workers, youth workers? I think it covers all of them.

In my capacity as course director of the MA Comparative European Social Studies (MACESS)¹, I regularly work with students representing a great variety of social professional backgrounds. The student group is composed of social workers, social pedagogues, youth and community workers, social advocates, socionomes, special educators, and even graduated students with a business administrative background in the social profit sector form part of the group. Indeed, a classroom where a lively multidisciplinary discourse is an everyday activity.

The debate on multi- and transdisciplinary work is often a discussion about the differences and commonalities of social professionals; in short, about their respective identities. It is my strong conviction that these identities are not so much framed by the original education social professionals received, but by the institutional context, in which they perform their profession. These are these working field organisations, that through their objectives and interests define the way social professionals have to think and act. Thus, the institutional context is responsible for the encouragement or discouragement of multi- and transdisciplinary work.

Let me first try to define the concepts 'multi- and transdisciplinary work'.

Multidisciplinary work is a co-operation - on behalf of the user groups - between social professionals who do not have the same, but connected professional and educational backgrounds. I think of social workers, social pedagogues, sociologists, psychologists, therapists, and so on. Their mutual co-operation is possible, because they are all linked to a common corporate culture, and because they are all used to work in a common and collective institutional context. It is this institutional context, which creates a common discourse and a shared set of norms and values.

Multidisciplinary work, both in social professional practice and in education, can in this sense rely upon a tradition of many decades.

¹ This course is offered by the Hogeschool Maastricht and validated by the University of North London. My colleague course director in London is Sue Lawrence

Transdisciplinary work on the other hand, is the approach, in which professionals of various and different backgrounds create co-operative links in order to meet the needs of user groups. I think of co-operation between social professionals, primary and secondary schools, police officers, shopkeeper associations, local government, profit and market linked organisations, and so on. Though representing the established institutions, the creation of loose and more or less informal networks is an essential characteristic of transdisciplinary work. A common approach is not defined by the established institutional standards and objectives, but emerges in an interactive discourse within the network. A shared set of norms and values is not a predisposition, but has to be created in the context of the network, within which various corporate cultures meet each other.

Multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary work is a 'social fact' in the Durkheimian sense of the word nowadays, and thus it is not relevant to discuss, whether this type of approach should be promoted. The perspectives are simply there for various reasons: the dismantling of the welfare state and the rising influence of neo-liberal market principles, the greater influence and participation of user groups in the process of meeting their needs, and the change from fixed social provision to flexible needs-based social services. Furthermore, multi- and transdisciplinary work is urged by the emergence of managerialism with its fixation on efficiency and effectiveness, the introduction of outreaching work in order to meet the clients in their natural environment and the rise of multi-functional organisations. In short, we can identify a process of de-institutionalisation, and we are thus beyond the stage of being for or against these approaches; in my opinion it is more relevant to analyse and discuss how social work and social workers are facing these developments.

I distinguish three types of reaction of social work towards the emergence of multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches. The first is what I call the 'ethnocentric' reaction, in which the social worker goes back to the traditions and roots of social work itself in order to re-find and re-gain the identity, lost in the new context of work. It is a longing for the past with the old values and principles, and an effort to reconstruct the formerly existing institutional frameworks. This reaction is basically a rigid and conservative one, denying and not-accepting the newly emerged situation; the social worker tends to spend his/her full energy in defending the own position in the reality of the multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary context.

The second reaction is a modernist one. Social work is identifying itself with managerialism and functional rationality. Focussed on mere outputs, social workers transform themselves into project managers, indifferent to what or whom they have to work: to meet the targets is the only thing that counts. With reference to Richard Sennett², the social worker has become 'the flexible man', detached and depersonalised from client groups and colleagues, from organisations and institutions, and he/she is running from project to project, finding the ultimate identity in meeting the targets.

² Richard Sennett – The flexible man

The third reaction is what I will call the 'civil' reaction. Aware of the traditions and values, conscious of the strengths and weaknesses, the social worker transforms rigid structures and methods into loose networks and flexible forms of intervention. She/he aims to develop a new discourse with a variety of colleagues, and their specific expertise is not perceived as a threat, but as a welcome addition to one's own knowledge and skills. Social work transforms from a monocultural setting into an enriched multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary context, which is characterised by active interactions and a vivid exchange of experiences and expertise. This development correlates with a social practice, in which the concept of 'social quality'³ has become the mainstream perspective of the European Union's social policy. The replacement of institutional *infrastructures* by multi- and transdisciplinary networks, and thus the creation of *infracultures*, has to be perceived as an appropriate answer to this changed social reality.

The first and the second reactions are traps, the third one, in my opinion, is a treasure. The civil reaction opens the door for a real debate between social professionals, and between social professionals and others. It creates the opportunity for organising common conferences and congresses of social professionals⁴. Furthermore, it enables social professional educators to identify common competencies and develop curricula to be attended by a variety of aspirant social professionals, ending up in general schools of social professional education with a broad range of options. Finally, it can be the starting point for the development of a new and strong identity of the social professional in a market-dominated and globalised world. And this construction of a strong social professional identity is urgently needed in a Europe, in which political and economic considerations still dictate the agenda.

Nol Reverda, June 2001

³ A good and recent article on social quality and citizenship has been written by David Phillips and Yitzhak Berman - Social quality and community citizenship. In: European Journal of Social Work, volume 4, Issue 1, March 2001; page 17-28

⁴ It is promising that the next EASSW conference in Copenhagen will be a joint one with FESET and the IFSW.