

# Abstract

Title: The professionalisation of social work

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This is a study of *Akademikerförbundet SSR's* (a professional organisation and union of social workers) ambitions to increase the legitimacy of the profession of social work in the period 1958 to 2000. The study is above all an analysis of how a professional collective acts in order to strengthen its social position on the labour market. The empirical focus of the study is SSR's attempts to increase social workers status by lobbying for state licensure and by introducing a self-regulated authorisation of social workers. SSR's professionalisation strategies, as well as its adjustments to societal changes are explored. Questions regarding SSR's concerns with *the training* of social workers, the *professional ethics* of social work, the *official recognition* of social work as a profession, as well as the union's concern with *internationalisation* are considered. The study contributes to our understanding of the possibilities and obstacles that current professional collectives' projects might face in their aim to increase a profession's legitimacy.

The analyses show that SSR initially (in the 1960s and 1970s) aimed to develop and strived for an improvement of the training of social workers – and consequently the professionalism of social workers. Initially social workers were trained in so called *Institutes of Social Studies* (Socialinstitut). However, SSR were active in the aim to make colleges and universities responsible for the formal training of social workers, as well as supporting the development of social work itself into a subject of research. Since the 1980s, SSR has made substantial efforts to increase the legitimacy and status of social work by lobbying for the profession's state licensure. In line with this effort, professional ethical guidelines were established. Repeated failures in achieving a state licensure of social work lead to a different strategy, namely the introduction of the self-regulated authorisation of trained social workers.

Within SSR, different motives were the driving forces behind efforts to increase the professionalism of social work in Sweden. In the study, *union interests* (founded in a culture of negotiation) that are opposed to *professional interests* (founded in a culture of professionalisation) are identified. This opposition has implied difficulties in presenting a congruent and homogeneous line of argumentation with regards to the status of social workers. This has reduced SSR's possibilities to be successful especially in its efforts to achieve a state licensure. Furthermore, while the aims of SSR's professional interests are found to be homogeneous, different actors within this fraction are driven by different motivations that are either *naive* or *cynical*.

The results of the study propose that SSR's project is a *flexible professional project*. This flexibility has proven to be crucial for a contemporary professional project. One reason is that professional collectives continuously need to adjust its activities to more general changes in society as well as to the demands of individual members.

In this study, the author uses records from meetings of the *Board of SSR* (SSR's förbundsstyrelse) as well as quantitative empirical data concerning members' applications to be authorised to the *Council for Authorisation of Social Work*. Furthermore, extensive secondary sources are used in order to reconstruct and analyse the professional projects that have been conducted during the period of investigation.

Keywords: professionalisation, social work, trade union, strategies, exclusion, inclusion, discretion, jurisdiction, licensure, self-regulation.