

Abstract

Title: Knowledge, academicalisation and professionalisation in social work (Kunskapsbildning, akademisering och professionalisering i socialt arbete) June 2000.
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At the end of the 1970s, social work was established as an academic discipline with research, professorships and PhD programmes. This dissertation consist of a number of studies and articles on the development and production of academic knowledge and research in Sweden, with special attention to implications for the relations between basic education, research and social work practice. These relations could be hold as the core dynamic in applied social work but also a source of tensions and controversies. The dissertation consists of five articles and a separate report (Dellgran & Höjer 1999). Following empirical data is analysed; (1) the first 89 PhD dissertations social work between 1980-1998; (2) more than 500 theses written by students on Bachelor's and Master's level 1977-97; (3) two examples of comprehensive theory for social work practice with great influence on social work education; (4) curriculums and courses in PhD-programs, and (5) literature on research methods within BSW-programmes. Our aim is to describe profiles of topics and subject matters, research methods, use and extension of theory, and to discuss important factors behind these patterns and some crucial aspects of the development of the discipline.

Both PhD dissertations and undergraduate theses are heterogeneous and include a wide range of different types of social problems and interventions. Regarding epistemological positions, qualitative methods dominates. To explain the predominance of qualitative methods a number of hypotheses involving both cognitive and social components are presented (the knowledge hypothesis, the cultural hypothesis, the resemblance hypothesis, the hypothesis of the paradigmatic development). On the whole the PhD dissertations gives the impression of a discipline with a great deal of knowledge import, theoretical pluralism and a high level of paradigmatic openness. On the other hand, sociology has a very strong position. The role of psychology is more concealed, and so far no Swedish dissertation has been dominated by references to social work. In the theses the situation for psychology and sociology is principally reversed.

The growth of junior and senior research has slowly begun to influence the production of new knowledge. If this could be labelled a "10/90-situation", we believe we are heading for a "50/50-situation". This is a metaphor for saying that future research in social work will simultaneously develop abstract, cumulative knowledge of its own and continue to use knowledge, produced outside the discipline. Another metaphor describes the direction of social work science as an initial rural landscape of knowledge with a certain degree of urbanisation, consisting of growing socio-cognitive networks of researchers. The result may be an exclusion of certain topics and areas and a troublesome narrowing of social work, at least as a research task. Furthermore, this dual development of deeper but more narrow scientific knowledge, is effecting the relation with the profession, social work management and other stakeholders with specific, but various, knowledge demands.