

Towards a relational transgression of the tensions between social work and social policy?

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Our contribution aims at exploring possible ways out of what seems to be a dichotomy-trap for the professions of social pedagogy/social work. The intention is to present a number of arguments to overcome the dichotomy between “economisation of the social” (management) and “the social per se” (the values and hard core of social pedagogy/social work). Our examination seems to show that methodological relationism offers at least new reflections and a new platform for lifting up the level of the necessary discussion. Theoretically the approach of Norbert Elias appears to further strengthen our argumentation. In the article we look for theoretical ways to solve the puzzle, but still in an experimental way, hoping for comments and open disagreements. We understand social work/social pedagogy as a set of certain common contours within which theoretical, methodological and substantial disagreements are thriving (to paraphrase Thernborn, in Sztompka 1994: 283). Our intention is – simply put – to question whether we without losing any substantial value and critical position can establish a counter-discourse in order to avoid the dichotomy-trap, at the level of local social work governance.



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Why does social work/social pedagogy have to react?

On a European level we are nearly overwhelmed by a wave of welfare reforms marked by common contours. The goals of these reforms are drawing on a common vocabulary (accountability, privatization, documentation, effectiveness), and the social practices seem more or less to be children of the universe of governance – a governance directed at reform changes close to practice it self. Since the Mid-eighties the tools used have been ”imported” from the NPM-supermarket, implying that tools as well as strategies are similar to the ones used by private companies: marketisation, standardisation, accreditation, benchmarking and strengthened competition.

The relative uniformity of the reforms can be explained by the fact that they are rooted in similar macro-sociological processes (individualization and globalization), and that the processes show quite similar demands of reforming countermeasures (Dean 2008) – regardless of differences in the formation and function of the national states. Rising complexity is but one of the common traits, causing new needs of governance. Governance has become decentralized, decentred, governmentalised and more plural. Consequently networks of governance are to an increasing extent put in to practice in order to carry out goals of reforms as e.g. accountability and more focus on systematic documentation. Practice seems to be embedded in governance rather than government. Government means that A is commanding B to do something by means of regulation and aiming at eliminating possible resistance. Governance is defined by the application of networks and different kinds of adaptation and by focusing on connections and conditions of connections.

The above is not exactly breaking news. The changes are already reflected in the international scientific debate. Primarily, the scholars focus on outcomes of the reforms in the different sections of public service and the importance of such changes with regard to shifts of the relations between citizenship, civil society, state and profession (and the discipline of the profession under siege).

The academic debate on the influence of the welfare reforms with regard to delivery of public social services show some general contours. The majority of the contributions seems to point at a sort of inappropriate contradictory relationship between NPM and social work/social pedagogy as a profession or contributions interpret the implementations not only as a treat, but furthermore as a undermining activity which might eventually force the professionals to take a political standpoint against such tendencies (Ziegler 2006). The operation may also be called a neo-liberal reframing of the social which has been strongly emphasized notably by scholars like Walter Lorenz (Seibel, Otto, Friesenhahn 2007). The two opposite poles of the contradiction contain varied suggestions to what may be labelled legitimate focuses of reform. They contain opposite types of rationality as well as different knowledge bases. In brief: the understanding of quality from inside the professional identity feels compromised by the managerial ideology – first of all due to implementation of technical tools and means of governance, characterized by a rationality foreign to social work/social pedagogy. This alienation “provokes” very deep feelings of the professionals and their terms of understanding or even appreciating their professional work (Parton 2008; Duyvendak et al. 2006, Satka et al. 2007).

To conclude this first part of the article: the debate is marked by a contradiction between ‘economisation of the social’ and ‘the social self’, rooted in critical sociology. Therefore, we question whether the academic discussion is lacking a platform, representing another path that will not lead to the dichotomy mentioned above. On one hand the academic debate accepts the legitimacy of the need for reforms and on the other hand it lacks suggestions for solutions at a paradigmatic level, which is why we find it interesting and important to investigate. Whether an illusion or not, scientific honesty requires to examine the situation and to explore other approaches. Much debate is still circulating within the dichotomy, so perhaps we are looking for a position, which is not implicating that dichotomy *eo ipse*. We are – of course – not suggesting that the contradiction is non-existing. But we would like to emphasize the necessity of a ‘raison d’être’ or a ‘modus vivendi’ making it possible for a professional to maintain her professionalism in a constructive way despite the current reforms. If we are right in our assumption, then we have to design empirical solutions including a more efficient and less conflict-ridden thinking of governance, organisation, management and professionalism as a whole and this thinking has to be deployed on a lower level of generalization. Is this outline a naive ideal? We hope not, but are anxious to know what our colleagues think.

Are alternates available?

Where do we look for a base for inventing and developing an alternate platform, supposing this to be a constructive counter-discourse? Where do we look for theoretical viewpoints capable of providing tools which at the level of social work practice are able to dissolve the conflict or contradiction? If such a platform does exist, how will it in turn influence the conditions and possibilities for social work/social pedagogy, for the professional identity, and for implementing the new goals of the welfare reform in practice? Is it possible for such a new theoretical base to synthesize and overcome the tensions between managerial ideology and professional identity on lower levels of synthesis?

Of course we can stick to positions conserving the fundamental dichotomy. This position is known as a stronghold against neo-liberalism. But it seems necessary and even more fruitful to make an attempt to transcend or synthesize the basic polarity. F. e. Sztompka (1994) describes a modern theoretical current of sociology, which seems committed to developing synthetic theories. This means theories, possessing the potential to transcend dichotomies. He claims:

”They [synthetic theories] draw a map of the social terrain in extremely large relief. They allow us to see the overall picture from a distance. Other theories must take up some fragments, aspects or dimensions and render them in fine grained details. The vogue for

synthetic theories does not diminish the importance of analytic theories. Synthetic theories try to account for the links, interconnections and bridges, but there must be more specific theories about what is being linked, connected or bridged: theories of structures and actions, personality and social organization, culture and personality, social roles and institutions, groups and movements, etc.”(Sztompka 1994: xiv).

Does the framework of synthetic theories of sociology make it possible to build a platform for a new counter-discourse or pragmatic discourse in the debate? The general idea behind this new platform is to emphasize the importance of practical solutions between managerial ideology and professional identity based on the point of view, that solutions are substantial and legitimate – particularly when constructed in a way which is sensitive to professional claims and the understanding of quality internal to the profession.

How do we go about constructing a new ‘platform’ which aims at transcending or synthesising the tensions between management and profession in practice? We try to answer this below by putting social work on the agenda as the case in question.

Following Sztompka the way forward seems to be finding a synthetic grand theory or if possible a more detached relational philosophy of science. Using this as a synthetic frame we need to find a set of middle range theories because ”it is precisely here, at this level, that the more specific, linear, explanatory and predictive hypotheses linked to empirical data and research results are to be found. And these are indispensable to answer more mundane, immediate, practical human concerns. The grand theories alone will not do”. (Sztompka 1994).

Which grand theories are able to deliver enough synthetic force? Again following Sztompka one will find a number of more detached attempts at synthesizing a relational ontology – including his own; but in looking for a thoroughbred radical relational (and therefore highly synthetic) grand theory with a distinct sociological interest, there is perhaps only one: Norbert Elias’ sociology of figurations. Sztompka remarks: ”In this sense Elias’ project of historical sociology is synthetic par excellence”, and he continues: ”Throughout his work runs a strong tendency to get beyond the customary polarities in thought, and avoid any position identified with these polarities” (Sztompka 1994).

Why is Elias synthetic, and how can this quality be utilized?

Looking exclusively at the position of Elias the synthetic quality stems from a radical transcendental (meta-)ontological unit of analysis – in the case of Elias ‘movement’. Descending one meta-level we find ourselves at the level where ontologies usually are to be found. At this level Elias builds a set of characteristics quite unique to his position (see Sztompka 1994). At this ‘normal’ level of ontology ‘movement’ is installed in a series of tools, which he calls ‘means of orientation’. Movement is installed in tools aimed at capturing illusive processes in flux, movements in interdependencies, figures in movement (figurations) or balances in flux. Because ‘movement’ can be seen as the unit of analysis the means of orientation as well as his whole position moves freely across disciplinary borders in general and all assumptions concerning time, space and culture. Using an Eliasian (meta-)ontology as a perspective, everything becomes movement (the universe is an expanding movement and so forth.....), implying that everything at lower levels of synthesis is dissolved into movement. This goes for the realm of physics, the bio/chemical realm and the social realm, which can not be differentiated or analysed in isolation. Only reason to think of three realms is a difference in the speed of the processes typical to the different realms. Simultaneously, all dichotomies on lower levels are dissolved – among others the dichotomy of ‘economisation of the social’ and ‘the social self’. The idea of ‘the social’ as a reified category in time and space – although influencing the utmost majority of sociology (Latour 2008) – does not exist within Elias’ ontology. On the contrary Elias provides us with a universe consisting of ‘movement’

exclusively, dissolving time, space and any essential understanding. Because of the dissolution of time and space the Eliasian ontology functions definitively as an independent and overarching rationality. Is it possible to displace the ontology of Elias and its transcending rationality to lower levels of syntheses in order to dissolve a state of tension between social work and managerial ideology by making his rationality operate in the practical universe of governance?

Elias provides us with a relational philosophy which seems promising in this respect. He does not explain his ontological levels in many 'words', but rather in 'movement'. He does not intend to express his philosophy in linguistic terms, but to a certain extent through procedures and exemplary figurations. In brief: Elias is not shaping a theory in a modern sense of that concept, rather he intends to develop an 'orientation' realized in means of orientation and figurations. Exactly here we are convinced to find his synthetic qualities. The whole 'plot' of this article is to introduce means of orientations and figurations as a kind of pillars supporting the transcending rationality within the universe of governance which arranges the organisational, governmental and managerial aspects of the 'interface' between social work and local government. Is it possible to re-configure practical 'interfaces' in order to make the transcending qualities of his means of orientations and figurations operational – and thereby overcoming any hardship or trouble when managerial ideology and professional identity intersect?

Means of orientation and figurations can – we suppose – be used as a 'vehicle' in a Latourian sense (Latour 2008). Means of orientation can transport a transcending rationality. A means of orientation is philosophically speaking construed to cope with and work in very high degrees of complexity without process reduction and therefore they do not collapse under the weight of generative complexity in a particular field. Below we present a rough outline of some heuristic characteristics of a means of orientation typical for the realm of the social:

1. A means of orientation contains a movement, either between two phenomena (in an interdependence) or between many interwoven phenomena (a figuration). The movement is in itself the operational core message that improves orientation. The deliberate avoidance of static definitions allows for movement to be the core message and it avoids reifications and process reduction of the phenomena in question.
2. Means of orientation have a significant freedom of movement across time, space, habitus, culture and civilisation because 'movement' is a highly abstract entity and therefore it is movable. For instance Elias shows us how his established/outsider figuration is as applicable to Western cultures as it is to Indian/Asian cultures (Elias 1994).
3. Means of orientation are de-contextualized because of the 'movement' in itself, but at the same time the movement portrayed is a reflection of real empirical process patterns (figurations) occurring in a specific realm and historical period and thus highly contextualized. Movement, figure and context are not separable, but rather they constitute a unity of what we usually divide into and label as 'form and content'. In brief: means of orientation defy static language, but simultaneously are expressed vividly in metaphors or exemplary tales using language.
4. The movement has no clear beginning or end and it is always unfinished – just as the position of Elias as a whole. One can take into account that a means of orientation which is used for governance purpose(s), will be in a kind of ongoing structuration process involving different materialities in the organisation, and we consider that this can be used strategically for governance purposes.

We believe a specific means of orientation will be used in practice both as an ideal and an analytic tool in the local context. It seems to us, that it may be the only form of orientation possible when the degree of complexity rises, as we are currently witnessing in local governance contexts where management ideologies need to merge with social work and the

identity of social workers. By and large we guess that means of orientation in the Eliasian sense corresponds to the heuristic descriptions of the latest form of reflexive governance (Dean 2008), aiming at strengthening the governance effort by inscribing the 'telos' in the governance tools themselves – the tool is the telos. When using means of orientation for governance purposes the 'telos' would be the 'movement' which is also at the same time the figure, the context and the form and therefore Eliasian movement is inscribed in it self – as would be the case for reflexive governance tools according to Rose. So means of orientation may open a potential for significantly strengthening the governance efforts and at the same time overcoming any dichotomous tensions. This strengthening of the governance efforts could – in theory – be done by those means of orientation, which is already made by Elias and the reception or similar tools from other management-type or social work-type discourses or even tools, that are produced directly in the context where they are to be employed, e.g. in municipalities where management ideology and the identity of the professionals meet in the realm of governance.

Question is if it is possible in practice to export and direct the transcending Eliasian rationality, in which the conflict between 'economisation of the social' and 'the social in itself' no longer can be neither perceived nor proliferated. Can we find such means of orientation with movements and figurations relevant to the intersection between management ideology and the social work identity? Can the aims of the management ideology (enhanced focus on documentation, accountability, benchmarking etc.) be reached through the Eliasian rationality simultaneously with the legitimate claims of the profession being aptly considered? Are Eliasian rationality and ontology able to do the jobs, which we usually conceive of, as jobs best carried out by the technical rationality or reflection-in-action? Is it possible that the Eliasian rationality directly supports practice in social work?

Rationality experienced by the professions

Below we sketch some advantages of the Eliasian rationality seen from the standpoint of the profession of social work. They are preliminary, but reasonable hypotheses, meant to create debate as opposed to stating the truth.

1. Eliasian rationality does not process reduce social work, which means that the rationality will not affect or destroy the optimum frame requirements for social work practice – on the contrary. The cognitive pattern that underlies the Eliasian rationality (that phenomena are defined by their dynamic relations (interdependences) to other phenomena) supports the cognitive patterns, which seem ideal for practice and for the conception of the recipients of social work services. They, too, are perhaps best understood as ongoing processes, marked by their interdependences to other phenomena such as work life, education, family, recreational activities and so on. The task for social work in this view is to bring about changes in a person's relations to work life, education, family, etc.
2. The Eliasian rationality is inclusive in a complete sense and in the spirit of Salamanca as well. There is no privileged point of departure or centre in Eliasian ontology, which will exclude or overshadow different angles, opinions, interests or types of people. The rationality cannot exclude, which is a quality, not even held by the established academic paradigms on inclusion. The inclusive paradigms are more or less mutually exclusive. One particular paradigm (the recent 'dilemma-perspective') defines itself around the impossibility of inclusion and thereby excludes the very idea of inclusion which is supposed to be its primary objective (Petersen 2007). In fact Eliasian rationality can be thought of as superior with regards to inclusion, and this is an advantage to the extent that inclusion can be regarded as a core value and primary target in social work. More orthodox readings of Elias may claim that Elias excludes language all together because all static elements (incl. words) must be rejected to leave room to dynamic movements. Others interpretations seem to think otherwise (Krieken undated). In general this rather philosophical discussion is not too relevant – in our

view – seen from the pragmatic viewpoint of this article.

3. In a practice regime (e.g. local government, municipality) that is facing growing demands of accountability, documentation, benchmarking and performance governance in relation to social work, these reform targets can in theory be achieved through measuring quantitative improvements (in essence measuring ‘movements’) using a yardstick or benchmark found within the ‘generic social work’ – discourse, that describes good social work practice in generic statements. In this way we may be able to establish locally based quantitative performance governance directly into the core of the social work profession and at the same time utilize an understanding of professional quality that are already accepted in the discipline and recognizable to most practitioners. We find this possible only because the statements in the ‘generic social work’ discourse possess a certain amount of relational qualities resembling those of the Eliasian means of orientation. Both of them (means of orientations and statements from the ‘generic social work’-discourse) orient action, bring about reflection and provide clarity and mobility in extremely complex contexts by offering themselves as tools of ‘detachment’. As far as we can see the difference between the ‘generic social work’-statements and the Eliasian means of orientation (figurations), is that means of orientation combine an opportunity for both detachment and involvement in the same reflective tool whilst statements of ‘generic social work’ seem to be generally detached leaving little room for involvement. We wonder, if the opportunity for both involvement and detachment in the same governance tool can be most helpful for social work practice, since it should consist of both. At least local and therefore flexible performance governance using yardsticks developed on the basis of the ‘generic social work’ -discourse must be preferable to national accreditation schemes, that are currently being promoted with some force in Denmark, but not yet widely used. Governance tools resembling means of orientation will most likely preserve reflexivity, counteract rationalization and standardization and strengthen the professional identity, just as the ‘generic social work’-discourse originally was construed to do. This strengthening can be a significant advantage to the profession in times where NPM-discourses deliberately seek to minimize professional autonomy and in the process erode the necessary esteem of the profession and the professionals. Perhaps what we are setting out to present in this article may be called context-sensitive performance governance, in the sense that it will support already existing rationalities or patterns of thought in a particular profession, in this case social work. It may be called sensitive in the sense that it strengthens the relational and reflective elements of the practice, which is in need of strengthening (Parton 2008). The example above with the ‘generic social work’-discourse may seem trivial, but it points to a possible ‘movement’ across the tensions between managerial ideology and identity of social work, that seems to hold some interesting qualities. It is exactly this kind of ‘movements’ or tension transcending figurations that we need to look for when investigating the empirical meeting between managerial ideology and social work through an Eliasian lens. These figurations (movements) need to be identified in a research effort at different levels of synthesis and then re-entered in to the practice regime as reflexive governance tools resembling means of orientation as much as possible (or necessary) to overcome existing tensions and displacing conflicting rationalities.

4. Any relational ontology – in particular the thoroughbred relational ontology of Elias – differs radically from the ontology of liberal humanism, which is premised on individuality, autonomy, objective distance, and so on. In the relational ontology relations are prior to entities and thus power becomes a matter of ‘power to’ rather than ‘power over’, which can only exist in a logic that gives priority to entities. Therefore relational ontology is highly democratic because it excludes ‘power as property’, but without losing attention to power relations or individuality. Because relational ontology constitutes such a profound break with liberal humanism we imagine it also constitutes an equally profound break with NPM as a governance paradigm. Instead we are apt to believe that radical relational ontology (at least in

the Eliasian version) may hold the potential for a new governance paradigm or at least a new overarching governance form or rationality (if you wish) in addition to the existing forms; clan, marked, hierarchy and network. Maybe the Eliasian (meta-)ontology is a basis from which to articulate a fifth governance form which may be labelled process governance – but this is still just too much guess work. Not entirely without some justifications, though. A Danish scholar, observer and former architect of the Danish NPM-reform movement in the eighties has analysed the NPM shortcomings and wrongdoings, and based on this analysis he articulates, advocates and anticipates a break with NPM into a new governance-paradigm, which he calls ‘the contextual paradigm’, because of its sensitivity to the local context and indeed to the profession in question (Lerborg, forthcoming). We believe that the idea presented in this article may hold some promise as to how this future ‘contextual paradigm’ could be made operational on the basis of radical relational ontology. The contextual sensitivity in the case of Eliasian ontology rests on the idea of ‘movement’ being a common transcendent denominator of any context, profession or reform target and thus not harmful to the existing logics of neither the welfare professions nor the reform targets (at least at the level of pragmatics).

5. The Eliasian rationality is per definition innovative. By using means of orientation, new recognitions will arise because the perception of a phenomenon is brought to a higher synthetic level (in being translated into ‘movement’) as opposed to being kept in a process reducing rationality carried by a reifying and static language, that blurs the illusory contours of movement and thus of developmental possibilities in highly complex contexts. Put differently, there will always appear new possibilities for alternative goal directed actions where means of orientations are being put into use. This leaves room for innovative action. Innovation is actually a knowledge sociological demand build into the Eliasian sociology of knowledge and thus into the ethos, the rationality and its means of orientation (tools). The Eliasian ethos seems to be: without innovation in the process of knowledge production there no progress will start in terms of the civilizing process. Therefore means of orientation is a philosophical and empirically based form of transport designed for a specific knowledge type that brings about innovation. The content is a transcending movement (potentially innovative), and at the same time the form is designed for movement (potentially innovative) across time, space, habitus and culture. By and large means of orientation are movement (full stop!) – and therefore they are innovative tools (full stop!). It is an innovative tool/movement in the sense that all movements transcend the status quo into something new, which potentially is an added value to the practice regime in question. If we ‘choose’ the movement carried by a means of orientation (used for reflexive governance purposes) to be an ideal or desired ‘movement’ in a practice regime (e.g. a desired routine, that leads to systematic evaluation of social work practice) and then introduces it as a governance tool and developmental target, then an employee can orient and adapt his or her own physical movement (or movements of other materialities) according to the ideal, and thus create the added value or innovation relative to status quo. The added value is not something that would have been created anyway, if a centre (in the Latourian sense) had not deployed this governance tool in relation to a periphery (Latour 2008), because this particular sort of governance tool uses a rationality that is beyond language, and therefore seeks new recognitions, that per definition is “below the horizon” (to paraphrase Elias) and as such not accessible to any of the more common and language mediated rationalities that may thrive in the practice regime. This, we believe, could be a significant dynamic and developmental advantage for the social work profession as well as for local government, which is required to function innovatively according to national policies on innovation in welfare service delivery. We see the same set of exceptions and the same commitment to creating innovative service delivery systems in the EU.

All relational tools and relational methods of tool development that are roughly acceptable within Elias' philosophy of science, is theoretically applicable transversal to different types of social services, target groups, practice regimes, national borders, time, space and habitus. This implies that the research and developmental work needed to realize the idea in question in this article to a large extent can be re-cycled and reused. Tools and methods are simply moveable if they fall within the limits of this position. Research results, generated in a radical relational framework, can be picked up as figurations and redistributed, because they – seen from the point of Eliasian ontology – have a superior range and scope of power, if used as governance tools. From the perspective of the ontology the rationality is transcendental in an absolute sense, which means that the corresponding form of knowledge (the means of orientation) most likely is ideal in terms of enhancing the power distance (the distance from a centre in which power is effective) across types of barriers that otherwise obstruct power in its course. It is worth examining if this rationality can be applied built into method developments within welfare services delivery and then exported to other countries. If this export is possible it holds advantages for any globalized profession as well as to the European commitment to one unified welfare service marked within the EU.

Means of orientation or tools with roughly the same characteristics can be used as analytical or action directing tools, no matter what role or educational background a person may have. Social scientist, leader, administrator or practitioner – the need for orientation in highly complex contexts and for analytical tools that will result in goal directed actions is the same in a radical relational ontology. This means that the Eliasian rationality does not differentiate (in terms of his sociology and philosophy of knowledge) between the role of a scientist, a leader, an administrator or a practitioner, and this in turn supports existing social work discourses, that seeks to create a new role for the social work practitioners, in which he or she becomes a researcher in his or her own practice: the practice of producer of knowledge, who will be directly usable for management purposes – at least theoretically spoken. This, we consider, could be a significant advantage in relation to overcoming some quite serious problems of coordination in the governance networks and perhaps even offering some new perspectives on controlling highly complex networks by manipulating some key balances of tension in the way a specific and historically embedded figuration is orchestrated (Elias 1986). This cannot lead to any causal, direct or detailed control of a figuration (e.g. a local government supplying social service), but – in theory - it seems possible by means of Eliasian thinking to identify and manipulate the figuration in terms of maintaining or optimizing a certain tension balance central to the whole figuration. In the context of the clash between European management ideology and the social work profession the central balance of tension in a specific practice regime (figuration), which may be of interest to both management and profession, is perhaps the prize/quality balance. It seems to us that this line of thinking presented here may hold some potential for a more precise and deliberate governance effort aimed at optimizing the tension balance between prize and quality. Without the Eliasian rationality (or a different version of a radical relational ontology), it seems unlikely that the price/quality balance will ever be conceptualised in a way, that allows for simultaneous manipulations of prize and quality by means of governance. Perhaps the balance between prize and quality – if not engaged through relational means – will continue to be separate phenomena in more or less opposed rationalities. The prize/quality balance may be just yet another expression of the underlying dichotomy of 'economization of the social' vs. 'the social it self' and thus in need of a relational theory to be mobilized.

Middle range theories

Returning to Sztompka's argument quoted at the beginning, there may be a need to find suitable middle range theories, if an attempt of utilizing or exploring the full synthetic qualities of e.g. Elias' relational rationality is to be made with regard to the tensions between

management ideology and social work. In the following we offer some thoughts on the matter of choosing relevant middle range positions as supplements to the Eliasian (meta-)ontology. In Elias' reception there seems to be two wings: a) an orthodox wing rejecting the idea of combining Elias' thinking with any other style of thinking, and b) an eclectic wing supporting the use of his position eclectically. The eclectic wing suggests to combine Eliasian and Latourian thinking. There is even some suggestions that a Latourian inspired reading and interpretation of Elias will overcome some deep rooted philosophical problems (the Hobbesian problem of order) and strengthen the position of Elias (Krieken undated). To quote a statement from the Eliasian net based discussion forum: "Elias and ANT [Actor-Network Theory] have a lot to teach each other" (<http://elias-i.nfshost.com/>). Latour seems to distance himself from Elias (Latour 2008), but in the eyes of the Elias-reception this does not make much sense. Putting this dispute aside we want to point to Latour as a relevant middle range supplement for Elias' meta-ontology. The point is that combining Elias and Latour seems at first glance to offer a full range of radical relational tools to explore if and how a radical relational approach to the tensions between management ideology and the professional identity of social work will transcend the tensions in an actual practice regime. The use of Latourian terminology at lower levels of synthesis will open for a research into the actor-network which is created by an Eliasian means of orientation (or any radical relational tool) that are being deployed as a reflexive governance tool in a specific practice regime. Perhaps it is possible – via Latour – to systematically evaluate the associative consequences (if not the effect) of Eliasian means of orientation (or tools with comparable qualities) by letting them circulate in a practice experiment. Other middle range theories with distinct relational characteristics could perhaps be used as a sort of interventionist framework for such an experiment that will test the idea of a tension transcending rationality in local governments. In particular Developmental Work Research and the notion of expansive learning by Yrjö Engeström springs to mind as a possible semi-relational and experimental framework. Through such an activity theoretical experiment it may be possible to co-configure new operational means of orientation which are targeted specific at different levels of the tensions in question. Primarily at levels close to practice (e.g. the level of the actual practice regime in local government), but in principle something similar should be possible at higher levels of synthesis (abstraction) using Elias' tool-box.

We see a potential in combining relational positions at different levels of synthesis (abstraction) in relation to overcoming the tensions between management ideology and the professional identity. This assumption is worth examining closer, and the idea of a potential for particularly social work may find some support in a recent article by Parton (Parton 2008). After diagnosing changes over the last 30 years in the internal structures which produce and reproduce the forms of knowledge in social work, Parton points to the need for new theories in social work, that will not polarize "the social and the technological, science and society, beings and things [because polarizing] is not helpful in opening up to explanation and understanding what is happening to social work and the impact and implications for its form of knowledge" (Parton 2008). Parton also mentions a broad tendency in social work theory "which attempts to construct an approach which is both subjective and social and which prioritizes the relational nature of the work" (Parton 2008).

Parton's article may be understood as an appeal for more relational theory. We propose to look for some sort of relational philosophical platform, able to organize efforts in the academic social work theory debates and help create a distinct position. For this purpose we suggest that it might be worth while looking closer at what Georg Ritzer calls "methodological relationism" (Sztompka 1994) or what Sztompka calls "the third sociology" (Sztompka 1994). Both concepts outline a philosophical stance, interpreted as radical relational and therefore transcending all polarizing dichotomies in an absolute sense. Perhaps these two concepts and their demarcations can be used as a set of heuristic criteria, by which

to choose, judge and match relational positions (as in the example above with Elias, Latour and Engeström) in the search for new ways to transcend and overcome the empirical tensions between management ideology and the professional identity of social work. These two concepts and heuristics stemming from the history of their sociological and philosophical genesis (as found in Sztompka 1994) may be able to constitute a new and philosophically elevated platform for further discussion in the scientific community of theoretical social work. Certainly they promise to transcend the opposition between ‘economization of the social’ and the ‘social-in-itself’ in theory. Whether this theoretical transcending quality can be transferred into practice and thereby assist in overcoming empirical tensions in the realm of social work governance, is a matter worth continued research.

As mentioned in the abstract we hope and wait for a debate and maybe even open disagreements in order to develop the above mentioned preliminary argument further. Thus all comments from any discipline are most welcome.

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