

# Like a fish without a bicycle? We need a science of social work! – Report from an invitational conference on the subject of “Shaping a Science of Social Work” at the University of Southern California (Los Angeles) in May 2011



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It is incontestable worldwide that social work needs a „science base“.

However, the discourse in the English-speaking area has been conducted under different auspices than in the German-speaking area, where in the last two decades a science of social work-movement has arisen. At present, each of the two areas has a different focus in the debate on social work – in the American context, the concentration is on methodology, whereas in the German-speaking areas, as a result of the polarization between social work and social pedagogy, it has been about a “disciplinary home” for the profession, which was searched in science of social work. It is therefore remarkable that this concept has spread. It will be of interest to pursue why this notion is received now in USA and how it is treated. The initiators of the invitational conference are Haluk Soydan und John Brekke from the School of Social Work at the USC, invited were mainly social work professors from the USA and Canada, Europe was represented by Stan Houston (Belfast), Walter Lorenz (Bolzano), and the author of this report. The conference was planned “as an attempt to see if these ideas could grow and take root in our profession”.

The thematic foci were:

1. Overview of the domains, core constructs, and characteristics of a science of social work (key paper: “It’s not about fish and bicycles – we need a science of social work” by John Brekke).
2. The history of ideas on social work relevant to defining a science (key paper: “Understanding social work in the history of ideas” by Haluk Soydan).
3. Philosophical underpinnings to the ontological, epistemological, and methodological frameworks of a science of social work (key paper: “The coming crisis in social work?: Some thoughts on social work and science” by Jeffrey Longhofer and Jerry Floersch, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey).
4. Framing social work education from a science of social work (key paper: Framing education for a science of social work: missions, curriculum, and doctoral training” by Rowena Fong, University of Texas at Austin).
5. Remarks on the European perspective (Walter Lorenz, Free University of Bolzano, Italy).

The following focal points can be accentuated:

a) Why a science of social work?

It began with the rather astounding recognition that science does not play a role in the mission statements of social work organisations (at most implicitly by research) – contrary to other professions like psychology, engineering, environmental science. In the preamble to NASW (National Association of Social Workers) – with more than 150 thousand members the worldwide biggest organisation of professional social workers – science is not mentioned once (Brekke, Fong). That implies that “our profession has a serious problem of self-definition” (Brekke). Social work, it is true, has a long tradition as an university discipline and well-accepted and successful research, but this is not seen as relevant for everyday practice by the practitioners (just as on this side of the Atlantic). One seems also to become aware that research remains disoriented, if it is not possible to refer to a “scientific identity” and that a professional identity is only to be gained by this. In the last instance, this finding means that the professional vernacular emerges without reference to a science base. It is essential that one does not simply refer to “science”, which always means references to “ill-fitting science of other disciplines”, but that social workers can refer to their own science (Fong).

The advantage of a science of social work is made obvious in Brekke’s following definitions: “A science is a combination of theory and empirical method, rooted in ontological and epistemological context, applied to a defined set of phenomena.” And: “..a science can provide a logic and coherent structure to our research activity. It can provide an intellectual accountability to our evolving theory and method.”

b) Understanding social work in the history of ideas

For Soydan, two questions of crucial importance arise: What is the discipline’s identity? What are the boundaries of the discipline in relation to other professions? He renews his familiar proposal of 1999 to deduce a theoretical frame from the history of ideas. Social work is a practical activity and a scientific discipline with two dimensions: the nature of causes of social problems (generated by society and generated by the individual) and development of ideas in the interaction between theory and practice (from theory to practice and from practice to theory).

He is criticized by Gambrill (University of California, Berkeley): “False theories about what helped people and what harmed them were believed for centuries such as bleeding, purging and blistering”. However, one has to concede that the result of Soydan’s deliberations corresponds largely with that what has emerged as mainstream (person in environment-perspective, plurisystemic perspective, action science).

However, it should be critically remarked that a rigorous testing of the action models in practice is impossible, if one only relies on the interaction of “theory” and practice; this can only be done with the concept of science as outlined by Brekke (see a).

In a co-presentation, Lorenz highlights the dialectics of modernity and calls for an accountability of practice that is to serve emancipation and freedom from domination. A concentration on a positivist paradigm in human matters brings with it the danger of instrumentalization and domination by scientific means. Therefore, the science project in social work from the perspective of practice and ethics must adopt a critical-hermeneutic position which is explicitly occupied with the subjectivity of needs and satisfying these needs from the user’s perspective.

Remark: It seems obvious that it would be essential to connect this argumentation with others under the common roof of a science of social work, otherwise a futile mono-focal orientation will arise.

c) Science of social work as a “translational science”

“Translational science” is a programmatic notion taken over from US medicine that is fruitful for the social work discourses (Brekke, Fong). The intention is to bridge the gap between science (and research) and practice, scientific insights must be translated in practical

application. This translation must not be a one-way-street (it is not only about a language understood by practitioners): the scientists must leave the ivory-tower in order to get involved in what the matter is in practice, and for practice it is about the introduction of the utilisation of research results for helping settings to facilitate keeping up the help promise. "Science-to-service and service-to-science interchange" is to be fostered.

Naturally, this translational science must be cross-disciplinary, because the problems of practice, at least where social work is concerned, can never be covered by a single discipline. Social work science as translational science has a promising future if it succeeds in referring the practice of help to science and research and in making the questions of practical help into subjects of science.

d) The need of epistemological founding: "facts are never theory-free".

That means that the observation of practice is always prejudiced, it can never be the starting point for shaping the scientific grounding of social work (a thinking that is wide-spread on both continents). Longhofer and Floersch argue from an epistemological position, they call it "critical realist personalism". They are critical realists arguing in the following way: "...facts are never theory-free. Thus all data is somehow connected to theory; and because our data are always influenced by our theory we do not experience events unmediated or directly. In short, when we observe social phenomena we do so with selected concepts or theory."

Remark: By extrapolation of this argument the blind spot of the conventional, merely profession-oriented thinking ("Which theory does practice needs?") becomes obvious, which is inevitably uninterested in a real programming of action because it is unthinkable that social work can do harm to the clients in the name of helping (Gambrill).

With their personalist position they emphasize the discursive character of practice and research which always take place between self-reflexive subjects. In this they see an essential limitation for the possibilities of science and research.

Further remark: It does not make sense to rely on one single epistemological position. One cannot deny the significance of their powerful argument, on the other hand one must permit "falsifying" procedures, because otherwise one cannot know whether one is able to deliver on the promise to social work addressees for changing their situation in cooperation with them or at least for improving it.

e) Study programmes with a translational science of social work orientation.

Not only the mission statements are to be rewritten, most important is "the use of translational science as the theoretical framework for redesigning our education with a science of social work orientation" (Fong). Translational research and science must be included in field training. For example: „Social workers ... use qualitative and quantitative research, intervention research, translational research, implementation research, and community based participatory action research“ as reformulation for EPAS (Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards) Nr. 2.6 Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research des CSWE (Council on Social Work Education) (underlined = former phrasing). Special attention is paid to translational education of the "stewards of the discipline" in doctoral programs.

f) The European perspective

Lorenz points to the pluralism of welfare regimes in Europe and to the tension between universalism and diversity. His concern is the political context which must not be ignored, because it immediately affects the development of method discourses. A unidirectional favouring of positivist approaches leaves out of consideration the socio-political context and so makes itself questionable.

What follows for the discourse in the German-speaking area?

It is thus about balancing "the mono-focal attention which practice receives in the social work profession" (Fong). Admittedly, this is set down in the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale

Arbeit (German Society for Social work) statutes: „The purpose of the German Society is the promotion and cultivating of social work in science, education and as a practice“ (transl.); also, the Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit (Swiss Society for Social Work) formulates “the concern to advance social work as a science” (transl.). Nevertheless the danger of using science as a servant for practice is not only a latent one. It is about scientific identity, the prevailing theory-for-practice-thinking is a misconception that is epistemologically not sustainable, the mere revision of curricula is not sufficient. It also becomes also obvious that the systematic and empirical requirements for a science of social work (comp. Brekke’s above definition) are underestimated. Certainly, the notion of a science of social work as a translational science is auspicious.

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