

Transforming Societies – A Challenge for Social Work in Europe. Reflections of the PhD-Pre Conference debate



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“Business as usual – carrying on as social work has done so far – working in the well-known manner while the world is transforming? Can that be the perspective for critical social work? In societies where poverty, unemployment and inequality of opportunities are symptomatic features of a radicalised market system? On the one hand, these trends threaten to obliterate the classical fields of social work engagement, on the other they make them more demanding. These trends, which encroach increasingly on most European countries, challenge us to act with determination.” (TiSSA 2014)

The 12th annual International Social Work & Society Academy (TiSSA) was held at Sofia University, Bulgaria. The PhD pre-conference hosted early career researchers from across Europe and Australia, providing them with the opportunity to present their research in progress and gain feedback from an international board of Senior Academics. In addition to the researchers’ presentations, there was an opportunity to engage in critical debate relating to the above statement, issued by the Chair of the International TiSSA Steering Committee, Hans-Uwe Otto.

This collective discussion paper aims to capture the essence of those debates, relating to the challenges for social work in a transforming Europe, which occurred over a three-day period. The discussions outlined in this paper represent and reflect the various voices which contributed from a variety of cultural perspectives from across Europe.

1. Acting with determination

Belonging to TiSSA’s new generation of researchers in the academic discipline and profession of social work, we are challenged to act with determination against ‘business as usual’, which has become a product of the dominant neoliberal paradigm in different governments’ policies. Something akin to the ice bucket challenge for social work! As early career researchers, a pivotal question for us related to the purpose of research itself. We felt that a major goal of social work research should be to analyze and critique accepted societal structures, to improve equal opportunities for all humanity – especially for those who are exposed to discrimination, marginalization and social disadvantage. This would incorporate both an analysis of individual need and structural barriers to change. Therefore the major challenge of how to disseminate critical research findings was discussed. It was recognised that most research is produced by the privileged and in this way reproduces a limited perspective on inequality. But how can we deliver these insights critically to diverse audiences? This would require finding meaningful ways to hold a dialogue with others e.g.

practitioners, academics and service users, which could not be achieved through the usual distribution of academic papers.

A reality of the social work profession is that whilst it has an overarching justice based definition, it contains multiple identities: the practitioner's, the manager's, the researcher's and the users of social services – all of whom speak different languages. A recognised problem therefore, is the lack of communication between the participating stakeholders – and at least the transformation of this language to the service users themselves. The knowledge production which occurs from research needs clear channels for policy and practice improvements, whilst keeping the service user at the heart of our endeavours. For an increased political responsiveness, multiple languages need to be utilised.

1.1 The relationship between research and funding

In social work we talk about emancipation for citizens but also for the profession of social work itself. We agreed that the overall aim of social work is to ultimately make the profession redundant. In terms of research, it was felt that the matter of funding creates barriers to this overall aim. With researchers heavily influenced by both governmental and private funding, can researchers remain aligned with the professions definitional goal of promoting social justice when others either define or influence the research questions and design thus shaping the findings? Social workers across the globe are facing ethical dilemmas which surround them in their workplace increasing difficult to negotiate. This is particularly salient in times of a reduction in welfare state provision. An acknowledgement of the profession's dependencies on the state and those in power needs to be continually addressed for social work to be able to identify and resist the neoliberal transformations which have changed the relationship between the social worker, the state and the people.

Social work cannot merely be a tool of labour market policy, which essentially serves the interests of corporate elites. New Public Management as the translation of free market principles into welfare services is demanding social work practitioners to do more with less public resources, and transforming the social work profession into a social policy instrument for activation. Although the practice of social work seems to be debilitated by the current political setting, we cannot neglect that this profession was established as part of the welfare state system, either under unique or similar political circumstances throughout Europe.

1.2 Transforming knowledge into action

How can we contribute to the wanted change? By participation in scientific and/or public discussions, shouting slogans and using our bodies as power source in ongoing resistance, in our local communities and globally such as the People's Climate March, Internet slowdown, social work's solidarity letter to Gaza? How can we transform new scientific knowledge into action and exercise the power of generated scientific knowledge in order to contribute to societal change? Action comes as an inevitable part of critical and transformative thinking. Where is the place of social work researchers in transforming society – in the streets with citizens or within academia, or both? As a practice based profession and an academic discipline, social work has much which it could contribute to such transformations. With its focus on oppression and structural inequality and as well its alignment with marginalised groups, social work's skill base of community organising, networking and empowering people has much to offer. As our profession has grown there is a greater understanding of the interdependencies of our world. For example, there is a strong exposure to the inadequacies of a growth-model economy which leads the profession to see the necessity for change.

1.3 Participating in change

The essence of our three-day TiSSA PhD pre-conference 2014, was not only to do “good things” e.g. in our small scale PhD-project’s, but also talk about these good things, so people can understand, get involved and participate in a process of transforming societies, to enhance the wellbeing of all humans and our environment. Within our discussions we recognised the ability of individuals to achieve change throughout history and considered Margaret Mead’s quote: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it’s the only thing that ever has” (Mead 1964). Whilst we fully acknowledged an individual’s capacity we ultimately need collective action. Looking back, we can see a long line of attempts to transform societies throughout human history. The group consisted of academics from across Europe, each with their own localised version of social work as well as their own specific histories involving societal change and ideological transformation. Many in the group had witnessed the downfall of socialism and the alleged triumph of capitalist domination and supremacy, heralded as an opportunity for hope and prosperity.

European cooperation and exchange among professionals of social work seems to be needed more than ever to be able to resist the current political frameworks or to create change in power structures or policy lines across Europe. Through connecting with each other we can promote a multitude of perspectives embedding critical thinking, to learn from each other and to find solutions to change existing societal conditions to achieve social justice, whilst considering that the “relational character of the social world in which the impact of practice depends on the social context in which they occur.” (Schäfer/Otto 2014)

2. Alliances against oppression

Business as usual? Carrying on as social work has done so far? This should be no perspective for critical social work, we think! We can become more politically engaged within our own communities. The process of achieving change is not a solo endeavour for social work. There is great scope for building stronger alliances with social movements, economists, scientists and citizens, to translate our language into the languages of other milieus. In social work we also talk about oppression. However, the group acknowledged the enormity of the challenge for social change at this juncture in history. We reflected that as a species perhaps we had never experienced true equality and freedom. We asked ourselves what is the lived reality of true human rights? There was a clearly held recognition of the people’s struggle to achieve the present freedoms we hold dear and benefit from. But as we are firmly within an era that is affected by the dwindling of non-renewable resources, this system and its reliance on economic growth is facing a severe crisis with unprecedented consequences. This ensures that industrial and industrialising nations simply cannot continue with the current mode of production.

Societal transformations will occur on a large scale, inevitably changing our way of living in a very radical way. It appears highly unlikely that the creative solutions needed to confront these challenges will come from the state alone and there is strong evidence to the contrary that corporate elites could be trusted to engage in such endeavours. Within this context the survival and future relevance of social work with its focus on human rights and social justice is at stake. Whilst our debate heralded more questions than answers, it nevertheless reinforces the profession’s commitment to action for change and justice for all. For our main research focus: the relation between society and the individual, we should capture how to make opportunities for a fulfilled life for all citizens possible, instead of ‘business as usual’ (cp. Schäfer/Otto 2014).

References

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The authors are a group of PhD students from different countries and universities, who worked and discussed together in the context of the TISSA PhD plenum 2014.

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