



## **Positioning Social Work in a Socially Sensitive Society<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1 Introduction**

As a practitioner, a manager and a scientist in social work for 40 years, I am still intrigued by the social work positioning and legitimating processes. Its recognition by users and financiers is often diffuse and its fragmentation sometimes hinders effective interventions. In social work itself, we see a range of positioning processes, most of them either legitimating social work as a promoter of social justice, a supporter of emancipation and anti-oppressive practice, or positioning social work as a therapeutic approach, treating people with socio-psychological and psychiatric disorders. Social work is often promoted as a 'real' profession, in need of formal recognition and in need of a precise profile. In this article it will be argued that the core of social work is about supporting people in their social functioning and should position itself in the centre of the post-modern quest: the social-psychological disorientation, the lack of meaning, and the problems of isolation and exclusion. Modern professionalism is not about demarcating and regulating but much more about 'Entgrenzung' and openness.

### **2 Social sensitivity**

All over Europe, the number of people in prisons, in mental health care, in youth care and in special treatment in schools is growing from year to year. In my country, The Netherlands, the number of prisoners has been increased by a factor of 10 in the last 50 years (Boutellier, 2002). The number of users of mental health institutions has increased by 30 per cent over the last five years (Kwartel, 2009) and in youth care by as much as 70 per cent (FCB, 2010). The number of children in special schools due to behavioural problems grew by nearly 40 per cent between 2000 and 2006 (Van Dijk et al., 2007). One out of seven children is in a special treatment programme (Hermanns, 2009) and nearly 25% of the Dutch population has serious problems in coping with their lives (GGZ, 2009). Many social experts expressed the feeling that post-modern society is a highly complicated world to inhabit and in which to develop an adequate identity and establish a stable context in which to live (Beck, 1986; Taylor, 1989; Giddens, 1991; Lane, 2000; Sennet, 2002). My thesis is that the increase in socio-psychological disorientation is a rather autonomous development, not due to economic recession, increasing poverty and suppression but to the ever growing societal and social complexity of our welfare societies.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a keynote speech Life course and social concepts at the Conference: If you speak my name, I vanish; International Symposium on Conceptualisations of Social and Educational Care and Support. 11-12.12.2009, Ghent University, Belgium.

### **3 From a State of Progress to a State of Complexity**

Until halfway through the twentieth century welfare societies were to characterise by their idea of progress. Progress in knowledge, science, education, civilisation and social quality were driving forces. The social quest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was mainly the fight against poverty and illiteracy (Beveridge, 1942). The majority of European populations were poor and uneducated. The answer was to build national systems for education, health, housing, social security and social services (Alcock et al., 2001; Beveridge, 1942). Along with this system building, the debate on categories that were lagging behind was prominent among policy makers and grassroots movements. The working class, the proletariat, women, immigrants, the young, the elderly, and the disabled were identified as missing out on full access to systems and they got their special targeted policies and interventions. Only white, well educated, heterosexual men between 25 and 55 escaped the targeting policies. In the 1970s and 1980s most Western European countries had accomplished their welfare state. It even became perceived as overly organised and bureaucratic, and under the pressure of recessions in the early 1980s and 1990s, the welfare state was thought to transform itself into a workfare state or activating state (Marsland, 1996; Giddens, 1998). The dominant idea that work and education are the essentials for well-being and life satisfaction prevails today and belongs to the socio-economic mode of thinking. The European Union, as the premier league of welfare states in Europe, sticks to work and education as the access to better societies and a better life (EU, 2010). This became quite clear at the moment the EU was confronted with problems in effectuating the Lisbon objectives: to be the most competing knowledge-based economy, with social cohesion and sustainability. A high level committee presided over by Wim Kok, the former Dutch Labour prime minister, concluded that the Lisbon Strategy was too ambitious and should concentrate on the competing (knowledge) economy. By that, social cohesion was considered as a result of a strong economy and high education (EU, 2004). In this socio-economic paradigm social work's main assignment was to fight against poverty and to support people in improving their socio-economic position or status. A dominant strategy in social work became the collective approach (see Payne, 2005) or anti-oppressive practice, both referring to the need of societal changes in structures and power-dependencies (Dominelli, 2002). The belief that social cohesion and social problems are disappearing with economic growth and improved education is, however, a misunderstanding. The welfare state, in its ever increasing complexity, challenges people more and more to find, rather autonomously, their life path in a highly open world. On the one hand, people are more educated than ever, are on average more prosperous and more 'civilised' in the Elias' sense (1939), but on the other hand, they lack more than ever a stable, clear and transparent context. In the last 100 years, the world population rose from one to six billion, and half of the world's population lives in cities, many of them in a megalopolis. Mobility and flexibility create a permanent world of discontinuity. People are missing an inner compass to find their way, and they are permanently expected to adjust to different situations and positions. Modern people have to live with different identities, to develop a world full of weak ties and to adapt to discontinuity in their daily lives (Taylor, 1989; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Bauman, 2001; Morin, 2008). The main task is to manage everyday complexity. I coin this as the socio-cultural mode. In this socio-cultural mode, the national system building answer is no longer appropriate, however, it is an essential basis for the state of complexity we live in. Socio-cultural problems are contextual, locally based and ask for custom-made approaches. The issue is not equal treatment for each category, but rather unequal treatment for each person, because each context is different and asks for different interventions. So far, the popular answers to this growing socio-psychological disorientation are mental health interventions and punitive measures. The missing strategy is to invest in local social supportive systems and

locally based social workers. In the Netherlands social investment in the frontline has even decreased slightly (FCB, 2009).

#### **4 The Therapeutic Answer**

Social and psychological disorientation are mostly seen as being based in personal confusion or individual disorders, to be treated with therapies and medicines. Until now in mental health and youth care, the dominating perception is to bring people back to psychiatric categories, answering a precise diagnosis, opening the possibility for a prescribed treatment. In particular in the US, social work positioned itself in the therapeutic corner. However, this approach isolates individuals from their contexts, isolates the presumed disorder from the person and reduces the professional support to applying protocolised treatments. The problems of orientation, coping with complexity and discontinuity ask much more de-categorising and de-protocolised interventions embedded in the context and the whole person (Hillebrandt, 2002). Of course, there are serious disorders in the field of mental health, but many people in need of intervention do not really fit the psychiatric disorders and belong to more vague and open categories, such as the roaming person who has lost every sense of direction and is not motivated or capable of redirecting him/herself and often even not willing to ask for support; or the person who is a prisoner in a strongly tied culture or group, unable to transcend this pattern; or the unnoticed person who is without a social network and is often ashamed of his/her position and identity, shying away from others. For these kinds of people, a protocolised therapy is not helpful. They need open, supportive interventions directed at the individual in context, and providing material and immaterial assistance and practical coaching. Even people with diagnosed and recognised disorders are maybe helped more by social support and adapting the micro and macro environment than by treating the disorder and hammering on about personal shortcomings (Hermans and Menger, 2009). For the better off, the therapeutic approach is most common, but for the marginalised people in our societies, a punitive approach is most popular. The latter are seen as dangerous and criminal and to be disciplined and locked up in prisons or youth care institutions. It is interesting to see how in the recent history of the European world, we changed perspective on the main indicator of positioning processes in society. For a long time, people were categorised based on their descent or background. Children received a status, profession and role in line with their parents' positions. In the nineteenth century financial capital was seen as the main road to welfare (Adam Smith, Karl Marx). Property was the door to citizenship and standing. In the twentieth century, the national systems were expected to guarantee everyone the opportunity to obtain a position in society. Education capital became the dominant factor (Bourdieu, 1984). Perhaps social capital is the new essential condition to obtain a position (Putnam, 1993; 2000). To behave properly, to be social, to develop strong social networks, to have the ability to adapt to different situations, to feel comfortable in different social groups, to cooperate and to socialise are crucial in the current state of complexity. In the workplace, in school, in the community, people are expected to adapt easily, to collaborate and act as socially competent. Social does not refer to 'being kind' or social justice but to the capacity to profile and position yourself in society and to manage the (social and societal) complexity. According to a recent European Research Report, from nearly 40 per cent of the working population in Lithuania to over 80 per cent in the UK work in teams (Kyzlinková et al., 2007). Craftsmanship and specific intellectual or technical skills are not enough to get appropriate positions. Additionally, or even more than that, personnel are judged on their communicative and social competences. If you look different, act different, seem to be uneasy in company, the risk of exclusion in school and workplace is manifest. Professional profiles and educational qualification schemes prioritise communication and social competences. You

hardly have a chance if you are a (slightly) autistic, depressive or an over-active ADHD person. Next to poverty and low education, social competences and social capital are essential factors in finding a position in society. Social workers as exponents of the social should be aware of this excluding mechanism of the social in post-modern societies and activating welfare states. It asks for reflection on the very basics of social work. We live in a highly social sensitive society and the lack of social capital and skills is by that an excluding quality.

## **5 Supporting Social Functioning**

In the socio-economic approach social work was an additional instrument to policies of equal opportunities and fighting poverty. In the therapeutic corner social work is considered one of the additional therapeutic modes to treat people with disorders. In my opinion social work has its own corner in supporting people in their social functioning as such – a domain of growing importance in post-modern societies. Social work is essentially not an additional tool for socio-economic or therapeutic or punitive objectives but has its own domain, in supporting people to manage complexity and to position and profile themselves in society. Recognising and answering socio-economic structural problems, power dependencies and physical, psychiatric, learning and socio-psychological disorders are highly relevant but not a starting point for social work. What is needed are social supportive strategies to help people to cope with complexity and to answer modern ideas about citizenship as being self-responsible and to act in a socially responsible manner. The State of Complexity ‘creates’ new types of problematic social functioning and we should re-orientate social work in some respects.

## **6 Philosophy of Life, Social Pedagogical and Social Work Resources**

My pledge for supporting social functioning of people as the core of social work in post modern societies asks for a re-orientation on, and integration of, the resources for social work. I restrict myself to three main origins of modern social work: philosophy of life, socio-pedagogy and social work.

### **6.1 Philosophy of life**

Social work in Europe comes from churches and religions, or as Payne (2005) expressed it, social work is a secular replacement for the welfare role of the churches. Charity was church-based and ministers and priests were professionals who intervened in the social world. Each small village had his own minister or pastor and charity activities. An intense and extended professional social support system was common until the twentieth century. Priests, ministers, as well as doctors and teachers in primary schools, came into the homes of the locals and were perceived as belonging to the local community. The dominant perspective of religion-related professionals was on meaning and belonging, in the first place. They believed that people in need and distress needed to feel a meaning in life. Charles Taylor referred to this deeper layer in human existence. He suggested that identity, moral behaviour are fed – or should be fed – by this connection to higher ideals, the ‘hypergoods’, as being essential to human life and our cultures (Taylor, 1989). Modern man is no longer a believer in a fixed system but is looking for an open framework, a wide horizon to live within. This search for meaning and the idea of binding hypergoods for mankind is an important key in social work to help people to give sense and direction to their lives. A second essential aspect of religion is the strong emphasis on ethics and social action. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew: 5-7) is still today a text which inspires us to live for others, to have compassion for the poor and most vulnerable people and to live an ethical life, inspired by values and altruistic feelings. The third principle I would like to stress, is the idea of reconciliation and forgiveness. In traditional local communities, it was often common for people to come together in the room of a dying person

to give this person and themselves the opportunity to forgive and to reconcile. Criminal acts were punished, often very harshly, but the basic principle was to reconcile the individual after the punishment with and within the community (Bogaers, 2008). Meaning, belonging, reconciliation, ethics and social action are fruitful resources from philosophies of life for social work that focus on social functioning.

## **6.2 Social pedagogy**

Social pedagogy has a long and independent continental tradition, embedded in the broader pedagogy discourse. Social Pedagogy is often profiled as a negative connotation as ‘not family, not school pedagogy’ (Bäumer, cited in Thole, 2002). Social pedagogy was in this perspective aiming at leisure time activities and from there trying to support families and teachers. A more pronounced and positive connotation is social pedagogy as ‘education within, by and for the community’ (Natorp, cited in Niemeyer 2002). From this perspective, social pedagogues are supporting and helping (young) people to become social citizens who are part of the community and have responsibilities to the community. Ecologic pedagogy nowadays focuses on strengthening local communities for an integrated approach from schools, families, leisure time, youth care and the physical environment (Tolan et al., 1995; Dubois and Krogsrud 1999). At the same time, social pedagogy is not only aiming at children and young people, but is referring to the whole life course, in particular the transition periods, such as from child to adolescent, from adolescence to adulthood, from work life to retirement, and from active elderly to frail elderly. People have to adapt to new stages in their life, and to different contexts. Social pedagogy is about ‘Bildung’ (development) as the quality in lifelong personal (social) development (Thole, 2002). Identity as a normative perspective – the well educated and ‘full’ personality – has long been the leading concept in social pedagogy and developmental psychology (Erikson, 1968), however was later contested because Erikson’s identity concept was felt to be a middle class identity which presented adulthood as the highest phase in the life course (Marcia, 1980). Young people were *becoming* adult and *developing* their identity and this was neglecting the identity of young people or working class people as respectful identities in their own right. Current social pedagogy has opened the floor for different identities, different cultures, different contexts and looks for supporting and intervening actions to empower each person to determine and to follow his or her own path (Niemeyer, 2002).

## **6.3 Social case work**

Social (case) work also has a long tradition, starting from involved middle-class women taking care for the very poor. In a way, there are two basic perceptions in social work history. The first one is the idea of a quite precise profiled profession aiming at the poor and excluded people who are dependent on social assistance and who should be supported to ‘help themselves’, to become independent from permanent support. This social work – sometimes coined as social case work – aims at short-term interventions to get people out of critical situations and to open the floor to self-helping processes (Reid, 1992). It changed social work into a thorough way of acting and helping people in need. It integrated material and immaterial support and took the complex situation people are in as the starting point for support. Up until today, this branch of social work has been one of the pillars in the broader umbrella-like social work concept, the other concept of social work. Social work as an umbrella is more inclusive, conceiving social work as work with individuals, groups and communities (Richmond, 1992; Payne 2005). From this perspective, social work is a quite open professional domain and less confined to a specific methodology, like case work or a

specific profession. In the broader scope on social work, social pedagogy is seen – but often not fully recognised – as belonging to social work.

### **7 Social Work as a Broad Integrated Profession or Professional Field**

Bringing together the resources and concepts from philosophy of life, social ecologic pedagogy and social case work under the umbrella of social work seems to me to be a fruitful integration for social work in post modern societies. It seeks to escape from a direct identification with one tradition or one specific social profession. Actually, social work is, perhaps for all, to be conceived of as a body of knowledge full of theories, practices, professions, methods and researches (Sheldon and MacDonald, 2009; van Ewijk, 2010). Social work as a broad umbrella-like domain is quite open, interacting with social policy and neighbouring fields. The point is that it is not a specific, narrowly defined profession or service that is the starting point for support but the specific context a person or people are in. Beginning from social problems about behaviour, relationships, resources and exclusion, social professionals look for appropriate actions. They are social professionals who are not specialised but are working in the swamps full of uncertainties, as Schön so wonderfully stated: ‘... there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing ‘messes’ incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern’ (1983: 42). Social work as a broad ‘swampy’ profession lost its character in the last decades of the last century. Specialisation and fragmentation in social professions and services occurred in most welfare states. The tendency towards differentiation, clear cut methodologies and hard evidence methods changed the swampy workers into workers looking for a small piece of hard ground but at the same time losing their fundamental broad and open orientation. It brought fragmentation in social work, leading to different curricula and a dazzling range of social professions. Local networks, local authorities, schools and housing corporations meet a whole array of social professions and social services, each of them representing a certain category of clients, a specific field or a specific method. A multi-problem family meets a similar array of professionals and institutions. We need to go back to the swamps and the full breadth of the profession. Actually, to conceive of professionalisation as broadening the domain and aiming at interdisciplinary co-operation instead of demarcating the profession is very sensible. This approach asks for a broad educational system, not connected to one specific profession, let alone a one-method approach, and it asks for an open flexible world of social services. A second step to a little more comprehensive and effective social field is to make more room for a basic local social support system. An open supportive local infrastructure seems to be a more appropriate and less cost effective answer to the State of Complexity, than the dazzling increase in the number of prisoners and intensive mental health users and the fragmentation of the front line in an array of different local social services. A local supportive structure is not meant as a strong professional-based institution, but the exact opposite. The idea is that informal networks, volunteers and professionals in schools, businesses, health and public sectors are more adaptive and supportive to people with social and socio-psychological problems or with psychiatric or learning disorders. Social workers are professionals who make their work productive and (cost) effective by activating informal networks, volunteers and the people in charge in the systems like schools, workplaces and authorities. Those social workers are recognisable and recognised in the communities and the other way round, the social workers recognise the people of the communities and take action when needed. The idea is close to what in the UK is defined as a lead professional:

‘The lead professional, who would act as the coordinator, negotiator and advocate of young people with multiple support needs could come from different backgrounds and act as a single point of contact, to trust by young people and families, able to support them in making choices and in navigating through the system and ensure that children and families will get appropriate interventions when needed.... reduce overlap and inconsistency among other practitioners and ensure that where the young person requires more specialist services...the young person is involved in an effective hand-over’ (DfES, 2005; Smith, 2008:59).

In this text the lead professional is restricted to young people, but it is obvious that a lead professional is to broaden their scope to different user categories. A Swedish research study concludes that users of social services (care of the elderly, in this case) are asking for a ‘professional friend’, someone to trust and someone with appropriate knowledge and skills (Berggren, 2010). This social worker acts on the individual micro level, the meso level of informal and formal networks and on the macro level of the local environment and institutions. This local, broad-base social worker can be seen as the additional and supporting power to maintain and to strengthen local social support systems and to act and to intervene in critical situations. This pledge for a local supportive structure and broad-base social worker is not a pledge for only one type of social worker. The reality of the State of Complexity is a high differentiation in services, professionals and specialisms, more and more organised as an open, partly privatised market. Additionally, we need a local social supportive structure, strengthened and supported by social workers. Broadly oriented local social workers are at the same time a link to the world of differentiation and could bridge between users and specialists and their institutions, and between individuals and networks or groups. It helps to overcome fragmentation of social action and interventions and prevents the accelerating increase in very expensive and rather ineffective institutional treatments. In the social work front line, the networks and volunteers are the base, and professionals are supportive and activating additional assets.

## 8 Conclusion

The State of Complexity creates new social and socio-psychological problems for a fast growing number of people. So far, mental health and punitive approaches are the dominant answers, bringing back the complexity to reductive strategies. A local social support structure as a mix of informal support, volunteers and social workers seems to be a reasonable, cost effective alternative, accepting complexity as the starting point and trying to support people to cope with this complexity and to survive in a highly social sensitive society. The social worker needed as a supporter, coach and activator of networks, systems and individuals in their context is a broad profiled expert, combining the classic traditions of social professions: social pedagogy, social work and using resources from philosophies of life.

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