

Editorial: Working across

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Guest editor

The main arena for this journal is comparative studies urging us to think across borders, boundaries and frontiers of different kinds. Foremost such borders are traditionally associated with places that are geographically bounded such as across states or nations, or across continents. However, working across may also encompass fields of another kind such as groups across age, culture, ethnicity, professions and other categories externally or internally defined. And, further, working across may refer to experiences that in one kind or another link up with our professional life such as being social workers or researching social work issues (Hall and White 2005, Oltedal 2005) as well as everyday life issues, troubled, complicated and complex as often is the case with people of major concern to social work, too (Anderson 2005, Wrong 2009, Hong et al. 2009). However, category work or drawing boundaries is a contested field in qualitative research where we as researchers ourselves easily may come to constitute and reinforce categories of the others as often claimed by non-western researchers (Asad 1977, Said 1979, Smith 2005, Sardar 2006), feminist researchers (Fine 1994, Olesen 1994), and ethno-informed researchers (Ryen and Silverman 2000, Frith and Kitzinger 1998) who focus on the local constitutive practices. Others, however, also insist on bringing culture into the local (Holstein and Gubrium 2004, Ryen 2008) to get the importance of the different contextual layers. This reminds us that “working across” also points to epistemology, an issue of a more basic concern in research though more so in the Anglo-Saxon inspired parts of the world compared to the European continent (Hoblauch 2004).

This journal issue reflects working across in its many different facets. First, we have three one-site projects. Though based on data from Norway they all accentuate how looking across in different ways inform their analyses, - across discourses (Levin), professions (Søftestad et al.) and processes in recipients` lives (Saltkjel). Next follows two articles comparing across countries though in their own ways. While one (Ntata and Biruk) looks into how western ideas about gender mainstreaming has come to influence the particular of the Malawian gender

context, the other (Oltedal) compares data across countries in the classic version of the term comparative studies. The two last articles both focus on methodological aspects, the first (Pirkanen) on interviews and the second (Hussein) on triangulation, or alternatively, they look across life experiences and across methodologies. Let us have a closer, though still brief look into these articles.

As a journal in social work, we start out with Irene Levin's article on "Discourses Within and About Social Work". Her focus is on "social work as a discursive practice" and "the social field between individual and society". With reference to boundaries of discourse she elegantly shows how this works when it comes to the more general discourse about social work and social workers and their own perceptions of themselves and their profession. Her analysis is based on data from Norway from social workers and their talk about working with cases.

In "Family Therapy and Young Abusers" Siri Søftestad, Margareth Bjørtvedt, Jorunn Haga and Karin E. Hildèn write about their experiences from a multi-professional team called TVERS ("across"). This team situated in Southern Norway works with a treatment programme for families where one or more children have experienced child sex abuse or have abused other children. The authors accentuate the importance of developing skills and competence in this field of sexual abuse carried out by children, and accentuate knowledge-sharing as one such device. Their article is based on their work with six cases or families each with a son who has been a sex abuser. This article also deals with working across professions and disciplines to reach out to young sex abusers and their parents.

In her article "My experience in life is that you should be careful with most people and not trust them too much" Therese Saltkjel explores into social trust among recipients of welfare support and services. Her sample is collected from two Norwegian voluntary welfare organisations and her data consist of interviews with 80 welfare recipients. Based on social-psychological theories, her focus is on explanations of recipients' variations in levels of social trust. Saltkjel accentuates the processes of marginalisation and thereby leads us in the direction towards (also) exploring across life-stages and – experiences. This is one of more publications from a larger study.

In "The challenges in doing gender research in Developing Countries: Focus on Malawi" Pierson Ntata and Chrystal Biruk write about the implications of assuming universalism and thereby risk ignoring the contextual. This has often been the case when international

organisations have imported complex and cultural concepts like “gender” across contexts into African contexts trying to enforce social change hence the authors’ “conceptual imperialism”. Ntata and Biruk also refer to their own experiences from gender research in Malawi.

Oltedal presents voices from poor single mothers and social workers across five countries in her contribution called “Reflections on the client-social worker relationship from single mothers and social workers in Australia, USA, Canada, Russia and Norway: Close but not too close. Distant but not too distant”. In this way she explores the contextual of social work based on interview data that in different ways involve clients, social workers and researchers. In her discussion of local context, she also looks across contexts with a gaze that nurtures reflections highly relevant to social work.

Pirkanen’s focus is on methodological issues or more precisely on challenges associated with life story interviews on sensitive childhood experiences when exploring across time in a person’s life span. She has called her article “Was your father a problem drinker? The challenges of life story interviewing in researching adult sons of problem drinking fathers”. This article takes us into the qualitative research work not paved with gold, but with challenges across the different activities from sampling to the vital analysis of bio-narratives.

Hussein writes about “The use of Triangulation in Social Sciences Research: Can qualitative and quantitative methods be combined?” She is working on a study on company welfare in Tanzania that calls for quantitative as well as qualitative data. Consequently, she explores into combining methods also “to ensure their practical potential in improving the living conditions in the region” as she puts it. Her focus, then, is on the credibility of scientific knowledge which in this case makes her look across methodologies.

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