

PERSPECTIVES ON CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISONS OF SOCIAL WORK

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Resumo

Neste artigo são discutidas e avaliadas várias perspectivas para o estudo e comparação do serviço social em diferentes países. São identificadas três formas principais de estabelecer comparações: comparações com base nos modelos de política social, comparações baseadas na profissão e comparações baseadas na prática profissional. Cada uma das três abordagens capta os aspectos essenciais das semelhanças e diferenças no serviço social, mas todos eles apresentam limitações óbvias.

Abstract

In this paper various attempts of studying and comparing social work in different countries are discussed and evaluated. Three main ways of making comparisons are identified: comparisons based on models of social policy, profession-oriented comparisons, and practice-oriented comparisons. Each of the three approaches captures essential aspects of similarities and differences in social work, but they all have obvious limitations as well.

Introduction

Comparative studies of social work have been a neglected field, but demands for them are increasing. This seminar is an example of that, and a couple of months ago I even attended a research conference on cross-cultural comparisons of social work in Havana! Efforts are made to promote international co-operation and common conceptions in social work, which could be seen as expressions of an ongoing globalization and academization within the field. Organizations like the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), founded in 1956, and where Portugal, France, Spain and Sweden are all represented, play an active role in this process. We also have the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the general idea behind ventures like these, is that since we live in an increasingly globalised world we cannot ignore the international trends and the effects that they may have on social work practice.

Palavras Chave:

Serviço Social; análise comparativa; modelos de política social; comparações baseadas na profissão; comparações baseadas na prática profissional.

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Key Words:

Social work; cross-national comparisons; models of social policy; profession-oriented comparisons; practice-oriented comparisons.

The two organizations that I just mentioned have also quite recently agreed on an international definition of the social work profession. According to this definition:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

As you hear, this is a rather vague definition, and it also includes concepts that could be interpreted in different ways; like empowerment and even well-being. Furthermore, it is rather idealistic: are principles of human rights and social justice really fundamental to all aspects and all cases of social work? You could argue that it ought to be, but the harsh reality remains an



empirical question. One reason for the vague wording is of course that it is hard to come to a global, common understanding of social work due to contextual factors like different welfare regimes and different cultural and professional traditions. And it is not easier to compare or evaluate social work in different settings.

Never the less, there is an increasing amount of articles and textbooks containing surveys and comparisons of social work in different countries. But how do you compare social work in different countries? What foundation can be used for such comparisons?


When I and a colleague of mine made a review of the comparative literature, which was published in *European Journal of Social Work* (Meeuwisse & Swärd 2007) and that I build on here, we found a few different approaches that were often linked to different levels of analysis from macro to micro. Furthermore, comparisons of social work were often based on a small selection of countries, and there was a particular focus on the situation in the Western world. In some comparative studies it was difficult to distinguish social work from social policy and welfare policy. On the other hand, a large share of the comparative literature dealt with parts of social work or special systems of assistance and control – such as child welfare, the foster-child system, costs for social assistance, etc. There are, for example, a fair number of comparisons and classifications of child welfare in different Western countries, but it is uncertain whether they are applicable to other parts of social work as well.

However, we identified three main ways of making comparisons: comparisons based on models of social policy, comparisons based on what we called profession-oriented comparisons, and practice-oriented comparisons. Each of the three approaches captures essential aspects of similarities and differences in social work, but as I will show they all have obvious limitations as well. I will try to sum up what has been discovered by the different methods of comparison and the criticism that can be levelled at them. Hopefully my presentation can serve as a point of departure for further discussions about how to conduct cross-cultural comparisons of social work.

Comparisons based on models of social policy

Many comparative studies and textbooks of social work proceed from models of social policy when comparing social work in different countries. According to this view, welfare programmes are of crucial significance for the organization and forms of social work. Welfare state typologies described by theorists such as Richard Titmuss (1974) and Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990) can thus be used for the analysis of different countries' ways of organizing social work.

In the book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* from 1990, Esping-Andersen argues that there are three types of welfare regimes, not just in Europe but in the entire modern world: a Social Democratic, a Conservative-Corporative, and a Liberal type. And he uses Sweden, Germany, and North America as case studies to illustrate these different regimes. Welfare in the individual countries is determined, among other things, by the degree to which welfare is publicly, privately, commercially, or corporatively organized. He also weighs up factors such as social differences and social inequality.



Stephan Leibfried (1992), whose studies concern Europe and who has placed special emphasis on how welfare states combat poverty, has supplemented Esping-Andersen's typology with yet another regime, namely, a Rudimentary Welfare Regime that includes the Latin or Mediterranean countries. (However, some scholars from southern Europe would instead view such countries as a subgroup of the Conservative-Corporative model). There have also been attempts to include the former Eastern Bloc states in Esping-Andersen's model by speaking of a Post-Communist Model (Deacon 1993). Some scholars also argue that Japan is a distinctive type of welfare state, a Confucian Welfare Model (Jones 1993).

Social-policy models and social work

Those who have tried to apply these models of social policy to social work argue that underlying ideologies, such as a social democratic or a liberal outlook, also permeate the practice of social work. This determines, for example, whether social work is regarded as a public duty, as a task for voluntary organizations, or something based on market solutions. The responsibility of the state varies in different systems, as do tax resources and the degree to which different systems are effective in combating poverty or protecting children.


Walter Lorenz, in his book *Social Work in a Changing Europe* (1994), claims that there are clear correlations between different types of welfare state models and ways of solving social problems. He argues that it is possible to distinguish four types of social work in Europe. Let me make a very brief summary of them:

The Scandinavian Model

The Scandinavian model is characterized by an all-embracing social service where general social policy programmes guarantee all citizens a relatively high standard of living. Instead of the market, the family, and voluntary organizations, local authorities play a central role as producers of welfare services and as organizers of comprehensive social work. The position of the municipalities as organizers and providers of social services is quite unique by international standards.

Another distinctive feature is that the Nordic countries have a comparatively large proportion of qualified social workers, even in relation to other comparable Western countries with a long tradition of training social workers. They are mainly employed by the public sector and social work is performed within the general Scandinavian type administrative system, and is based on case management and on the application of the law. This also means that social workers acquire a dual role as both helpers and controllers. When Nordic social work is compared with that of other countries, the preventive orientation is also often stressed.

In a more critical vein, it has also been pointed out that there is a readiness to intervention,



which can be repressive, and a Nordic tradition of coercive care for children and for adult substance abusers. Furthermore, it is sometimes claimed that the strong faith in public services and the publicly employed social workers have had the result that ethical issues have not received as much attention as in other systems.

The Corporatist Model

The 'corporative' model proceeds in large measure from benefits connected to a person's occupation. It is based on a corporatist organization of society, which means that the social state delegates responsibility for welfare and insurance to occupationally based, religious, and voluntary organizations. In Germany, which is often regarded as a prototype of this model, a great deal of social work is performed by welfare associations, which are members of six large umbrella organizations. Some of these, but not all, are close to the church. In this system, there is a clear division of social work – on the one hand a small amount of specialized public social work, on the other hand a larger free social welfare, run by corporative organizations on a non-profit basis. Publicly employed social workers often handle tasks involving social control, people's fundamental economic problems, and problems in the family, while other tasks are handled by various corporative bodies. What is characteristic, according to Lorenz (1994), is a wide range of service offers and a professional standard, which does not have the character of charity.

This model is based on the 'subsidiarity principle', whose advocates' claim that social problems could and should be solved as far as possible without intervention by the state or the market. It is expected that the delivery of services should primarily be organized within local communities, although with state help if necessary.

The Residual Model

The 'Residual Model' (which is sometimes also called the Liberal Welfare Model) entails an ambivalent attitude to welfare. Britain and Ireland are regarded as examples of this model. The public sector provides a minimum standard when it comes to economic security and these benefits are often perceived as stigmatizing. Society intervenes if children are in difficulty or not properly cared for.

The work by the social workers employed in public service is geared to the exercise of authority, such as control and emergency interventions. The voluntary sector, and professional groups other than social workers, is responsible for preventive work. And in the Liberal welfare model there are also private welfare programmes that are run as profit-generating enterprises. Social work is often differentiated, comprising everything from individual social work to structurally oriented work. In this system a polarization often arises between the social workers that exercise a controlling function and those who work with preventive or assistance measures.



The Rudimentary Welfare Model

In the 'Rudimentary' welfare model, finally, social work is weakly organized and the dividing line between informal and formal care is blurred. Those who need help have to rely in the first instance on the family, the church, or various charity organizations. Greece is seen as an example of this model. Social work is poorly coordinated and the measures are often geared to child welfare and work with the family. This is one way of comparing social work in different countries, in this case European countries.

Objections against model comparisons

But, even if it is possible to identify different ways to organize and carry out social work in different systems, there are a number of objections against model comparisons of this type, in which the diversity of different systems must be reduced to a few characteristics.

One type of objection is that the models build on dubious assumptions. Female scholars have for example claimed that the welfare models proceed from a male norm (men's wage labour) and do not capture the different positions of men and women in relation to the market, the state, and the family. (Some female scholars have therefore worked with completely new typologies.)

Others have questioned whether there really is a self-evident link between welfare models and all the social work that is practiced. Comparative studies of social assistance systems in Europe do for example show that the differences between different welfare models in this respect are decreasing. Ivar Lødemel (1997) uses the term 'welfare paradox' about models of poverty which – in contrast to the characteristics of a generous and general social policy that emphasizes social rights – are based on tests of needs and means (which is the case of social assistance in the Scandinavian countries).

It has also been questioned whether it at all is as relevant today to think in terms of models as it used to be. Sometimes the expression 'welfare mix' is used to describe the way in which many countries today mix elements from different models. The demographic development and globalization processes force countries to reduce costs and rationalize, and make them more inclined to try new solutions. Due to the rising costs for care and the ageing population, there is for example a whole new openness in the Nordic welfare states to the idea that people's needs for welfare can be satisfied in other ways than through the state, in other words, that responsibility for welfare can be divided among different actors. In this way the structures in the different welfare systems are becoming more and more like each other. And, of course, the European Union also plays a part in this process. It has now also moved into field of social policy, and the so-called 'social dimension' of the European Union has developed far beyond what was perceivable some years ago.

Even though the social policy systems and the organization of social work in several respects still differ between different countries, it is also not certain that this has any decisive significance for how the work is done. Michael Lipsky (1980) has drawn attention to the fact that so called 'grass-roots bureaucrats', that is public officials (such as social workers) who have direct

contact with citizens in their day-to-day work, have a certain freedom in deciding how they do their work. Studies have shown that social workers in fact have quite substantial possibilities to influence decisions in individual cases. At the same time, there seem to be forces acting for uniformity. Social work, just like, say, the school system or the police, displays certain common features regardless of which welfare regime it operates in. People active in a particular field often acquire a similar way of thinking and working through education and professional exchange. And social work has had powerful international organizations for a long time. There has always been international exchange through conferences, journals, and books.


Let us now turn to another way of making comparisons of social work. Besides comparisons based on models of social policy there are for example profession-oriented comparisons where the role and the function of social workers are compared in other ways.

Profession-oriented comparisons

Idit Weiss and Penelope Welbourne (2007) have conducted an interesting cross-national comparative study of social work as a profession, based on comparisons of social workers' professional development and professional status in different countries.

Table 1. Examples of criteria in profession-oriented comparisons

How is social work defined, who is counted as a social worker?	Clearly defined area staffed by uniform professional groups	Less clearly defined area, different professional groups are counted as social workers
The history of social work	Long history	Short history
Central tasks of social work	The problems of individuals	The problems of the collective and the local community
Theoretical and methodological tradition	Psychodynamic tradition Casework tradition	Community work, social mobilization, etc. Pedagogic tradition Radical social work
The social workers' form of employment	Mostly public employees	Mostly employed by voluntary organizations, churches, and civil society
Principal orientation	Oriented to authority	Not oriented to authority
The social workers' powers	Relatively great power, closely allied to the state apparatus	Relatively little power, dependent on the bodies they represent
Education	Academic discipline Theoretical knowledge	Non-academic education Practical training
Qualified social workers in the population	High proportion	Low proportion
Research in social work	Occurs	Does not occur
Degree of professionalization	Powerful professional and interest-organizations	Weak organizations, low profile



The conclusion drawn in many of these types of comparisons is that social work exists as a concept and as a professional activity both in the so-called developed industrial countries and in many of the developing countries. The basic tasks – solving social problems – are shared. Many of the problems identified are also found all around the world, for instance poverty, substance abuse, children who are in need, youth problems, violence in the family, and old people who need support. In the practical form taken by social work, however, there are many differences in terms of organization, social workers' employment conditions, and power relations. Education for social workers also shows both differences and similarities. Social work is not always defined as a separate subject, and in some countries no formal training is required to become a social worker.


It is sometimes argued that it is meaningful to distinguish between Pre-industrial agrarian societies and Western industrial societies. In the Agrarian societies (developing countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia), many social problems are solved through the management of the family, the church, or organized on a voluntary basis. In the industrial Western states, on the other hand, social work has a long history and a case work tradition – based on psychological and psychodynamic forms of treatment – have a powerful position.

Objections to profession-oriented comparisons

But there are objections to profession-oriented comparisons as well. Not least since these comparisons are based on someone defining what social work is, who social workers are and what themes are compared, and there is no taken-for-granted consensus about this. This approach in fact often proceeds from a normative standpoint and the outlook or the values that apply in the Western democracies (e.g. Payne 2005). You could say that there is a continuum imagined from less developed to more developed social work, and that social work is assessed in relation to the country's degree of modernization. These assumptions can be questioned – and have been questioned by a number of scholars.

According to for example Malcolm Payne (2005) the individualistic approaches that imbue European and North-American social work are not meaningful in societies that emphasize mutual dependence and respect for authorities. The outlook of the family differs between for example China and Europe. In Europe the emphasis is on independence and on upholding the independence of family members. In other parts of the world it is instead important to retain the traditional parental authority, and many cultures put great trust in family networks. The Western theories and models that have been transferred to other countries, without regard for local traditions and social needs, do not work at all well in rural Africa and Asia.

Many social workers in developing countries rather work with projects aimed at stimulating economic and social development. Here the tradition of advocacy and community work has a powerful position. Instead of social work there is often talk of 'local and regional development', 'empowerment', etc. And in Latin America social work in many places has been influenced by a liberation theology adopted by sections of the Catholic Church and the liberation theory of Paulo Freire, resulting in a strong social justice and social action focus.




Profession-oriented comparisons are of course also problematic from a methodological point of view. Even if we stick to the terms ‘social work’ and ‘social workers’, they can have different meanings in different countries, which makes comparisons difficult. In France, for example, the term *travail social* is a collective term covering eight or nine occupational groups with different education and occupations. In other parts of the world not all these professional groups would be counted as social workers. In some countries a distinction is made between social pedagogy (*Sozialpädagogik, éducation spécialité*) and social work, while in other countries there is no such distinction. In some countries youth workers and community workers are counted as social workers, but not in others. And so on.

Practice-oriented comparisons

Answers to some of the questions about similarities and differences in social work in different countries can only be obtained by investigating what actually happens in social workers’ practical exercise of their profession. Although they are still relatively rare, some attempts have been made to base comparisons on systematical examination of what the social workers actually do in the encounter with their clients. One method used for this is called the ‘vignette method’, which is considered well suited to comparative studies. This method can be used to capture similarities and differences in for example social workers’ views of how different client categories should be handled, how they decide priorities and how they judge which laws are applicable. In concrete terms, the method proceeds from fictitious cases that are as true to life as possible. Social workers are asked to reason about how the cases should be assessed and to suggest measures. The vignettes are often designed so that the situation can be developed from being a seemingly simple or vaguely formulated problem to become a complex case that puts social workers in situations where they have to make tricky choices.

One example of a comparative study built on the vignette method, concerned child welfare and was conducted in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Britain and Texas (Soydan et al. 2002). About 1000 social workers took part in the study. The study revealed both similarities and differences between the countries compared. But above all, it turned out that there were great variations within the different countries: there was no clear congruity in the social workers’ assessments – which of course also has implications for cross-national comparisons. So, an important finding of the study is that the social workers own experiences and knowledge together with available resources are of great significance for the outcome.

Another example (Blackman 2000) is a study of eldercare in six European countries representing different welfare models. Based on some case descriptions, a number of social experts in each country stated what help measures would probably have been used. What proved to be crucial was the view of the family’s role as care provider. There were clear differences between individual-oriented countries and family-oriented countries. One case concerned an old widow with severe joint pains. In Denmark and Norway the woman, after a formal assessment by a nurse or a social worker, would have received support adjusted to her needs, mainly in the form of home help and some health care in the home. In Ireland, Greece, and Italy there were no uniform assessment principles, and the woman’s relatives, and sometimes also neighbours, were expected to take on the main responsibility for both economic and practical care. Depending



on needs and availability she could possibly receive some supplementary help through public or voluntary organizations. So, according to this study welfare models do influence how elder care is organized.

Critical objections

The basic critique against the vignette method is that it uses fictitious cases. We don't know how the social workers would have acted in reality. The only thing we really can say is how the social workers wish to portray themselves. Knowledge about social workers real actions would have required concealed participant observations (which are difficult to carry out and maybe also unethical) or personal file studies, but then the problem would be to find similar cases to compare.


Vignette studies can, however, be a useful complement to other methods in comparative studies, and that is how we use the technique in an ongoing comparative study of social work practices.

A mixed method approach

In order to be a bit more concrete I would like to say a few words about this comparative research project where we use a mixed method approach. The project is a co-operation between scholars in social work from Lund University in Sweden and Helsinki University in Finland. A Nordic reference group, consisting of experts in the field of child welfare has also taken part in the organization and planning of the study.

The aim of the project 'Is there a Nordic model in social work?' is to capture similarities and variations in the concrete performance of social work through a comparative approach. Our point of departure is that policy models still provide a useful analytical tool when investigating social work. However, the issue of possible models should be made into an empirical question. Our assumption is also that answers to some of the questions about similarities and differences in social work in different countries can only be obtained by investigating how social work is organised and worked out in practice. We have tried to answer these questions through two main strategies: case studies of social work in child welfare offices in four Nordic capital areas and a large survey among Nordic social workers.

The case studies focuses child welfare because it is historically one of the core areas of social work and because the work presupposes considerations of a wide range of problems: for example family relations, abuse, poverty, addiction and immigration. We are studying child welfare mainly from the perspective of the work carried out at the social welfare office level. The research is based on case studies of municipal social work in four capital areas: Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo and Stockholm. The study focuses on small child welfare units with up to 15 social workers, in fairly similar districts characterized by relatively widespread poverty and social problems.




Our mixed method approach for the data collection includes:

- Statistical and descriptive data (including the legal framework, a description of the organizations, number of clients, different types of organizational plans, annual reports etc)
- A systematic analyses of all incoming referrals to the child welfare office during a three months period
- Vignette studies
- Personal interviews with social workers, managers and politicians
- Focus-group interviews with teams of social workers
- and Participant observations

We are still working with our data, but on the whole, our analyses, point at a common model of child welfare in the selected welfare offices in the four countries. This common model also in many respects seems concordant with the features that are usually considered typically ‘Nordic’. The results from our referral study (Blomberg et al, forthcoming) do for example seem to clearly reflect a so-called ‘family service oriented’ and preventive Nordic child welfare system. The preventive approach was a leading key word in many of the plans and strategies of all the offices we studied, although it was not given a very precise meaning. All offices were also engaged in different preventive projects, often aiming at supporting children at risk (usually together with the school authorities), support to couples expecting a child or couples that have recently become parents (usually together with health care personnel), as well as anonymous counselling. Furthermore, referrals concerning abuse or neglect of the child did not predominate and social work practices to a large extent focus on ‘supervision, guidance and cooperation’. However, further international comparisons would be needed in order to establish whether these features are actually unique to Nordic child welfare. Apart from similarities we also found rather extensive structural differences between the countries studied. These include a varying extent of organisational specialisation – the Norwegian office being more specialised than the Finnish, Swedish and Danish ones. Our study also indicated rather considerable differences regarding the workload at the respective offices.

Apart from the case studies we have also conducted a large survey among social workers in Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway. In total, 5 554 social workers took part in the survey. The questionnaire included a number of questions concerning working conditions for Nordic social workers and their perceptions and attitudes towards social work and social policies.

In many respects these results also support the assumption of a common Nordic model in social work, even if there were clear differences regarding working conditions among social workers in the different countries. But the dominating explanations of poverty and the images of the unemployed were for example fairly well in line with the normative standpoints of the Nordic welfare model. Most social workers see poverty as a result of ‘injustices’ in society, rather than as a result of individual shortcomings such as laziness and lack of will power. But we found divided attitudes towards workfare-related policy measures. We could for example see



that it was more common among Finnish social workers to support workfare related policy measures than social workers from the other Nordic countries; Finnish social workers were more inclined to agree with statements like ‘Cash benefits should be linked more to obligations’. We also found that ‘age’ is of importance for attitudes towards workfare elements: the social workers being most critical towards workfare measures are those who grew up during the expansion of the Nordic welfare states, while the oldest and the youngest ‘generations’ were more positive towards workfare measures.

We have a lot of empirical data and there is still much to do in our project, but we think it would be very interesting to try to expand the study to include more countries and other welfare state models than just the Scandinavian Model.

Conclusions

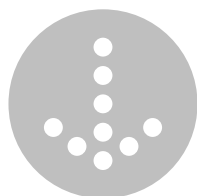
I have discussed some different ways of studying and comparing social work in different countries and have tried to show both what they can contribute and how they can be criticized. It is evident that most attempts at comparisons have limitation, partly because one is forced to select certain aspects and ignore others. There is always a risk that the comparisons will end up in sweeping and one-sided generalizations and that similarities and differences in social work are either underestimated or overemphasized.

The greatest problem in comparative studies is of course the difficulty of deciding whether it really is similar things that are being compared in the different countries. Social work can be pursued in different sectors, by people in different professions and with different tasks and authorities. Just to sort out these matters and obtain the necessary basic statistics often requires much effort. Another problem concerns how different concepts and terms should be translated and interpreted, since it is far from self-evident what people in the different countries really mean by the terms. Also, many cross-national studies lack consideration for both historical conditions and current trends, and thus easily become flawed. But problems like these should of course not be a reason to give up; they should rather be seen as a challenge to meet! Cross-national studies are needed in order to shed light on the global challenges in social work and to increase our understanding of the contextual nature of social work.

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