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Reflection theory - A concept for developing knowledge based social work practice

By Maria Appel Nissen

In welfare policy and social work practice in Denmark there is an increasing interest in the development and implementation of evidence based research and practice (Shaw & Bryderup 2008). This interest has a broader reference to social, economic and demographic changes within modern western welfare societies, to changes in relations between politics, welfare systems, and individualized citizens, and to changes in governmental strategies inspired by New Public Management as a political theory (Hagen 2006, Nissen 2011). These changes also refer to a fundamental problem of legitimating the use of (tax) resources, and meeting with an increased skepticism towards the quality and outcome of (social) welfare efforts. In social work practice this problem has led to an increased demand for time consuming procedures of control and documentation, and the use of technologies which put the capacity to reflect over and develop the quality of social work under pressure.

This paper introduces the concept of *reflection theory* as an innovative concept for enhancing knowledge based social work practice (Hagen 2006, Nissen 2010). Reflection theory is a concept which involves a disciplined inquiry in both social work research and practice. As a *concept for research inquiry* it involves an abductive process of research aimed at developing theory about and for practice. In doing so, it draws on formal theoretical concepts which are open to empirical research in the informal theories of practice (Payne 2005); it develops qualitative knowledge about theories in practice as well as theory for practice in a constant dialogue between formal theoretical concepts and informal concepts of practice. This is a process of *integrating theory and practice*, and the purpose and potential outcome is the development of a reflection theory which can inform *disciplined inquiry in practice*.

In the first part of the paper I will describe the concept of reflection theory thoroughly as a form of knowledge, and as a concept with operative implications for research inquiry. In the second part of the paper I will describe the main elements of a specific reflection theory about and for social work practice. This reflection theory is developed on the basis of the research inquiry described above, and on the basis of qualitative research projects - all of them addressing directly or indirectly the following research question: What are the qualitative forms of knowledge in social work practice? (Nissen 2005a, 2005b, 2007, Nissen et al. 2008) I will also suggest how this reflection theory can lead to disciplined inquiry in practice revealing *basic theories and concepts of practice*. In the end of the paper I will discuss how this form of inquiry can influence the capacity to reflect upon and develop knowledge in practice as well as the quality, effect and legitimization of social work.

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