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The Sociological Sense of Social Problems in Social Work Practice

- Reimagining Social Problems?

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SSSP 2013 Annual Meeting
Re-imagining Social Problems:
Moving Beyond Social Constructionism

August 9-11, 2013
The Westin New York at Times Square
New York, NY

Panel Proposal

Theorizing social problems – linking research and social work practice

Panel co-organizers: Søren Kristiansen, Aalborg University and Maria Appel Nissen, Aalborg University, Denmark

This session focus on the inter-connections between social work practice, research and the theorizing of social problems. The aim of the session is, on the basis of a selection of diverse empirically grounded research projects - some which are conducted within the field of social work or among welfare state professionals - to identify insights and constructs that may prove useful in terms of theorizing contemporary social problems; in developing social work practice and for re-imagining the links between social work practice, research and theoretical conceptualizations of social problems.

Panel Chair: Søren Kristiansen, Aalborg University

[panelist 1] **“The sociological sense of social problems in social work practice”**
Maria Appel Nissen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University

Abstract:

This paper explores the understandings and explanations of social problems of social workers. The paper is based on empirical research of social work conducted in different context, and offers an analysis of the “sociological sense” of social problems inherent in the practice of social work. In the paper it is suggested how this sociological sense involves at least three different forms of knowledge. Firstly, it involves understandings and explanations of the social forces in society, which contribute to the emergence and construction of social problems. Secondly, it involves understandings and explanations of the manifestations of social problems as well as the mechanism inherent in the development of social problems. Thirdly, it involves a sense of the complexity and multi-causality of social problems, which create an undeterminable space in relation to knowing how to solve them. Whereas the two former can be related to ontological models of society and social problems, the latter can be related to an epistemological reflexivity concerning the uncertainty of understanding and explaining social problems adequately. On the basis of this, the paper tentatively discusses how this double orientation towards both the ontological and epistemological dimensions of social

problems inherent in the sociological sense of social problems in social work can be perceived as a sociological phenomenon – and whether we as sociologists can learn something from this.

[panelist 2] **“Capacity development as the answer to social problems”**

Mia Arp Fallov, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University

Abstract:

In recent years, urban regeneration has in Europe been the test bed for the development of active citizenship in order to generate social inclusion. It is argued that such neighbourhood regeneration programs are an expression of a governance strategy which aims to deal with assumed problems of lacking social inclusion, integration and employability by developing the capacities of the citizens, local areas and the professionals governing the development process. The paper investigates this strategy to govern social problems through capacity development and how we are to understand it theoretically. Moreover, the dilemmas and potentials associated with such a governance strategy are discussed through empirical examples from a comparative study of neighbourhood regeneration in England and Denmark. It is argued that the experiences with these strategies not only carve out new governance subjects promoting the capacities of active participation and employability, each resting on particular forms of knowledge and generating specific forms of reflexivity, but likewise represents dilemmas of new forms of exclusion.

[panelist 3] **“What is poverty? A study of the factors affecting the judgement of poverty by future welfare state professionals”**

Merete Monrad, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Work

Abstract:

The paper examines what factors impact welfare state professionals' perception and judgement of poverty. This question is crucial in terms of how professionals respond to poverty and the study thus seeks to inform public debate, social policy, social work practice and the education of welfare state professionals. In the paper horizontal vignette methodology (factorial survey) is used to examine, what factors impact whether students in a range of different welfare state professions judge a person or family to be poor or not. This methodology offers some unique possibilities for studying the factors that impact on people's judgements, since it entails a systematic variation of the content of a vignette describing a person that may or may not be perceived as poor. This approach makes it possible to analyze the extent to which each of the variations (e.g. specific deprivations) are significant for the judgements made. The study includes students from the fields of nutrition and health, nursery teaching and social work. Students rather than professionals are included in the study since their judgements are important to examine in order to evaluate and improve teaching on perceiving, understanding and addressing poverty. Furthermore, students are future welfare state professionals who may encounter and have to respond to the social problem of poverty.

[panelist 4] **“Narratives as a contribution to social work practice and theory understanding social problems, change and problem solving of tomorrow”**
Vibeke Bak Nielsen, Doctoral student, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University

Abstract:

In IFSW terms and professional self-conception, social work is about social change and problem solving. It is characterized by diversity and complexity. The definition of change and problem solving is negotiable, related to reflexivity and knowledge about context, agent in structure and the space of possibility. As social professionals we know a lot about the social implications and destitution of unemployment, lack of education, alcohol and drug abuse, youth criminality, mental disorder and poverty. We have knowledge about the construction of social welfare issues and problems; social pathology, value conflicts, deviant behavior and labeling. But we know less about how the user of social services make sense of the causes and consequences of their problems, the space of possibility, and how they find pathways to solutions. We know little about how they in social interaction negotiate, relate and shape understandings of social reality, possibilities, change and problem solving. This presentation reports findings from a project aiming at generating knowledge regarding vulnerable youth relating to education and work as space of possibility and agency, taking responsibility and dealing with available social identities in a diverse and complex social reality. The project focusses on narratives as contributions to social work practice and theory in understanding social problems, changing and problem solving.

[panelist 5] **“Youth gambling careers”**
Søren Kristiansen, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University

Abstract:

This paper presents results from an ongoing qualitative longitudinal project exploring the gambling careers of Danish youngsters. The project is designed as a panel study following 50 young Danes over a three-year period. Three waves of semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 10-12 month intervals and this paper reports the findings from the first two waves of interviews. Theoretically the project draws on the interactionist tradition especially the career-concept as it was outlined by Howard Becker in "Outsiders". One of the overall intentions of the project is to develop an in depth understanding of the ways youngsters move in and out of gambling (and problem gambling) and how these routes are influenced by motivations, beliefs and various social and cultural factors. The project seeks to move beyond what has been described (by Nancy Krieger) as the “atomization of the explanatory mechanisms” in the prevailing risk factor paradigm and to thus contribute to further development of the available and relatively broad models of stages in the development of gambling problems. Presenting data from the first two waves of interviews, this paper then address the question: Under what circumstances do young Danes become engaged in gambling. Theoretical and interventionist implications are discussed.