

Research issues in Social Work – some examples from Sweden

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1. Introduction

I will talk about research issues in Social Work in Sweden but first I will give you some information about social policy in Sweden, about the academic discipline Social Work and about basic training and training for research.

Sweden is a universal welfare state and social security is provided for the entire population. Doing so is primarily the responsibility of the public sector, i.e. of both the national government and local authorities. Consequently, the public sector is large and tax rates are high.

Local authorities in Sweden have a high degree of autonomy. Local authorities set their own taxes and local income tax is the main source of revenue for municipalities. The fact that the local authorities are responsible both for child-care services and for care of dependent older people has very much made it possible for Swedish women to work in the labour market and pursue careers. Thus, families in Sweden do not have as important a role in the care of children and care of the elderly as they do in many other countries.

Income security is mainly provided by social insurance. This system is a universal one, applying in principle to all inhabitants and giving them quite a good compensation for loss of income while unemployed, sick, retired etc. For poor and destitute people there is a possibility of getting social assistance financed and administered by the local authorities.

2. From social policy to education.

Sweden is a member of the European Union. According to the so called “Bologna declaration” the member states have decided to create a unified design for higher education in Europe. For Sweden this standardisation drive has just started. So from this academic year on, we have a new degree structure and a new credit system at our universities. I will not go into details here but proceed to training in Social Work

The basic program in Social Work takes 3 1/2 years that is seven terms. When having finished the program the student gets a Bachelor degree. Six of the seven terms consist of theoretical studies and during one term we have compulsory supervised field work.

Graduates in Social Work can find work within a wide social sphere. Social services departments in local authorities are by far the biggest employers of our graduates. They offer work in social welfare e.g. with:

- children and their situation (including investigation concerning custody and adoption)
- social assistance
- drug abuse
- care of disabled persons and elderly

Our graduates also find work as social workers in hospitals, in schools, in correctional care or in social insurance offices. Social workers also find employment in institutional care (for children, drug addicts etc).

For Bachelors we have voluntary Master-courses of one or two years' study. The Master-students have to write and defend a scientific thesis. Being a master is a precondition to enter the PhD-program. Four years is generally the minimum for the Ph D exam. Approximately half of the time is devoted to writing a doctoral dissertation. Each Ph D student has a supervisor. Supervisors are of course professors, but they must nowadays have attended a special course in supervision. The aim with such a course is to increase the competence of the supervisors and consequently the quality of dissertations. Such courses will probably be compulsory also for supervisors in Master-courses.

Students in the PhD-program are regarded as employed by their schools and they have quite a good salary while studying. As being regarded as employed they have access to office-space with normal facilities such as telephone, computer-services etc.

In 1977 Social Work was established as an academic discipline in Sweden. Before that, we had no research in Social Work and students in the social work-program did not study social work as an academic discipline. In those days the schools of social work had traditional academic disciplines like sociology, psychology etc. but also more practical courses where the students were training social work methods.

So Social Work is quite a new academic discipline in Sweden. How do we define Social Work? The discipline Social Work includes studies of causes of social problems affecting individuals, groups, communities, etc, as well as problems in relations between individuals and their social environment. It also includes studies of different solutions to social problems and preventive measures which can be taken, from a macro-level (i.e. welfare policy) down to a micro level (i.e. work with individuals). Social Work as a discipline was formed from the traditional disciplines that we had before.

This means that professors in Social Work often have another academic background than Social Work. It could be economics, sociology or psychology. The younger professors have often their background, their PhD, in Social Work.

Let me say something about how research in Social Work is financed in Sweden. Much of the research is carried out by the PhD-students, and they have their salaries as I said before. Post-graduate research is often financed by independent state Research Councils. There we have to apply for funds and the competition is nowadays very tough. As there is a shortage of money now, Swedish research councils provide support only for research of the highest scientific quality. A frequently used term nowadays is “excellence”. So for instance, only 10-15 percent of those who apply for funds at research councils get money. Another tendency nowadays is to concentrate funds to multidisciplinary centres of excellence. In this case researchers in Social Work collaborate with researchers from other disciplines.

I will now give you some modern examples from Sweden regarding research, theories and methods used in Social Work. The examples are taken from my own school of social work. In many ways, it is very difficult to do classifications because research areas are not homogenous as regards problems, theories or methods and the limits between the areas are not sharp, but I will give it a try.

3. Social Welfare and Insurance

Social insurance is a cornerstone of the general social welfare system in Sweden as I mentioned earlier. In addition to social insurance the social welfare system includes benefits linked to employment, i.e. contractual benefits. When comparing social welfare in different countries or studying the development during a long period both social insurance and contractual benefits must be included to give the whole picture. This is the new way of looking at social security and this is one of my research areas.

The objective of our recent research is to study the interplay between contractual benefits and social insurance. Research questions are: Which factors influence contractual welfare design and spread? How does the government act in relation to contractual solutions in the labour market? How do trade unions and employers associations act and how do they look upon different combinations of social insurance and contractual benefits?

In this context I will inform you about something very specific to Sweden that you do not find in many other countries, and that is **the principle of public access to official records**. This means that researchers in Sweden who study for

instance social insurance and welfare have full access to all documents and reports in government authorities and in local authorities (if they do not contain military secrets and the like). So when we do research it is quite easy for us to get information from governmental sources.

In the welfare area we also include studies on “lack of welfare” for instance poverty, marginalization and social exclusion. This has for some years been a very important research topic in Europe as a whole. For the Swedish welfare state this research deals with conditions of support, processes of marginalization and economic disadvantage. Consumer conditions of poor families with children, juvenile unemployment and difficulties for young persons to settle down during welfare crises are examples of research issues. Research in this category has often an ethnical perspective. Sweden is an immigrant country and many immigrants and refugees have problems in the labour and housing markets.

The housing situation has played a very important role in the Swedish social-political system. During the last decades there has been a change in housing policy and the expansive regions of the big cities have experienced difficulties in the housing market and groups of tenants have been marginalized and homeless.

So studies of homelessness have been important. Research issues here are primarily variations and local strategies to prevent and take measures against homelessness. Focus is normally on the municipal welfare level, since it is in the municipalities that individuals get into contact with the welfare state in the form of local systems, operators and institutions.

For this category I will give you an illustration from a recent doctoral dissertation. The object of the research was to study the relationship between consumption and economic scarcity. The study of poor peoples' consumption has earlier not been a major issue in research of welfare and poverty.

There were two main questions in the thesis: The first focus on the structures that create specific conditions for low-income consumers. The second relates to how the households cope with the fact that they live with scarce economic resources.

The empirical material included four different qualitative studies. The studies indicated that the position that households have in relation to the labour market and to the welfare security system is crucial to the households' possibilities as consumers. A marginalized or excluded position in these fields also tends to raise barriers in the consumer field. The mechanisms in the field of consumption can therefore be understood as related to those which create processes of inclusion or exclusion in other fields. For example, unemployment can be seen

as a marginalized position in the labour market that also hinders in the field of consumption. Secondly, the consumer field has its own mechanisms that create different possibilities for different groups. There are mechanisms that exclude households with scarce financial resources from different types of consumption. To get a credit or loan to buy durable consumer goods can be impossible. Also, consumption can be made more difficult for poor households because for instance that they do not have a car or access to the internet. The third mechanism has to do with price. Poor households often have no buffer, no money, that they can use in consumption to save money. So they cannot take advantage of for instance quantity discounts or sales.

4. Elderly people and care for the elderly

In Sweden, just as in many other industrialized countries, the number of elderly persons has been increasing. Of the 9 million inhabitants Sweden has at the moment, slightly more than 17 percent are retired. By the year 2030, the corresponding figure is 25 percent. The demographic conditions made it more or less necessary to reform our pension-system. The former pension-system was of a defined-benefit kind. The new pension-system is contribution-based and the size of one's pension depends on the sum of these contributions. The more one has worked and paid in, the larger one's pension becomes. So there are nowadays no promises that you will get a certain level of pension as was the case in the former pension-system.

Elderly care in Sweden is, as I have told you before, very much a municipal matter. For elderly persons, receiving elderly care is a social entitlement, that is regulated by the Swedish social service law. Elderly care in Sweden is financed to about 95 percent by municipal taxes and to 5 percent by fees. Until recently, local authorities have had a monopoly in providing elderly care.

Because of economic and demographic developments there has been a tendency for local authorities to provide help to fewer persons and for help to be concentrated more and more on persons particularly in need of help. In the future, elderly persons will probably be more dependent on services and help from relatives or from voluntary organizations. Voluntary organizations play for the moment a minor role in Sweden.

Different measures have been taken in the local authorities to increase efficiency in elderly care. A modern measure is to create so called quasi-markets. This means that competition and a market-like situation in elderly care is introduced and elderly persons are free to choose one of at least two providers, one being run by the local authorities and the others by private enterprises. There is a

growing interest for this model in Swedish municipalities in order to increase quality and efficiency in elderly care.

These changes in elderly care are of great interest to follow for our researchers. The same holds for research about arrangements and facilities to make it easier for older people to live an independent life in their own homes. Research on ageing and elderly care is of utmost interest for the national government and for research councils, and they have given priority to this kind of research.

So a lot of research is going on within this area. Here you find good examples of our broad definition of the discipline Social Work. Here you also find different types of studies in different academic traditions e.g. economics, sociology and psychology.

Let me give you some examples of research concerning elderly and elderly care. At our school we have a research program named "Care for the elderly: conditions and everyday realities". The research program's aim is to describe and make visible the everyday aspects of care for the elderly, as they are experienced from the perspectives of care providers and care recipients. Very often participant observation has been used as a method in these studies.

I will give you an example of a doctoral dissertation within this program. The dissertation was called "Everyday life in different worlds – dementia and caregivers in three group homes". This thesis was about the residents and employees at three group homes for old people suffering from dementia. The empirical data consists of participant observations and interviews with the care-givers during 2 years. The aim of the dissertation was to describe and understand what happens during daily life at the group homes.

Research is also carried out on organization and funding of elderly care. Due to economic and demographic pressures these are nowadays very relevant issues. The same holds for costs and cost-efficiency. Here we find studies on comparisons of costs of different forms of residence in which care is involved, such as comparing the costs for a person living and receiving care at home with the costs for living and receiving care in an institution or special accommodation.

As I mentioned before the Swedish pension system has been reformed. Earlier we had a defined benefit system, which means that you could plan for your retirement knowing in advance the level of your pension. The new system is a defined contribution one. The more you have paid in, the higher your pension will be. So this will probably increase labour supply and more generally have an impact on peoples' behaviour. We know very little about this but research is going on especially on how people prepare themselves for retirement during the

new circumstances. We have here been involved in a comparative study on planning for retirement in different countries.

A lot of research in the discipline Social Work concern social organizations i.e. how welfare providers organize their activities. This kind of research also applies for elderly care and I will give you an illustration. It is about the care manager reform in Sweden in the 1990s. First I must say something about this reform. Community care of the elderly in Sweden was characterized earlier by a monopoly of the local authorities regarding both the assessment of an elderly person's need of care and the provision of care. A home help administrator assessed the care an elderly person needed and was at the same time also in charge of the personnel who provided the care.

A new model that has developed is termed the purchaser-provider split. It involves keeping assessment of the elderly person's need of care separate from the provision of care. The tasks of the care manager are concentrated around needs-assessment only. Within a fairly short time span, a great number of municipalities decided to implement this new model. So, a central research question was how the rapid diffusion of this organizational model could be explained.

The research showed that there were differences among the municipalities concerning the arguments used when the reform was launched and implemented. A key to understand the impact of the reform is that it over time was ascribed more and new problem-solving qualities. Among the early adopters, the model was justified by ideological arguments, and the reform was seen as a necessary element in the privatization of elderly care. The other municipalities in the study were not inclined to adopt the model in connection with privatization rhetoric. So a second discourse, that paved the way for the care manager reform is connected with cost-efficiency. In this discourse the reform was associated with control of costs and a more restrictive needs-assessment practice. In the last phase of adoption, the reform had reached the status of a fashion prescribing the modern way of organizing elderly care.

5. Children and child welfare

Children and child welfare is a traditional and well established topic in Swedish social work research. The welfare of future generations has for many decades been important both for politicians, research funds and researchers.

The concept *child* includes studies on childhood and persons up to the age of 18, especially individuals in less privileged circumstances. The concept *child*

welfare includes studies on state-family-relations, child welfare organisations, different ways of defining and treating social problems, and on child welfare programs, interventions and outcomes. Research in this field has different designs and theoretical approaches. Child welfare is a comprehensive term for social measures as to children who suffer or run the risk of suffering in their immediate environment, who have social problems or are expected to cause problems as a result of their own behaviour.

Research about children and child welfare has throughout the years had a given place in the research carried out in Social Work. A number of dissertations and research projects have dealt with the efforts by social services and care in institutions for children. Some research-projects focus on understanding and causes, others focus on interventions and effects.

Let me give you some examples from modern research. One example is a longitudinal study of children from a children's residential home. The selected group of children has been followed up, from early childhood to adulthood, i.e. 20-25 years old, with focus on their placement, experiences, well-being, family relations and social situation. Another research project is called "Children without home". The aim of that project is partly to describe and analyse the phenomenon of homeless children, partly to try to describe what it means to be homeless, from the children's point of view and from their parent's perspective.

Many researchers are working on child welfare. Just to give you an illustration of quantitative methods used in this category I will shortly present a dissertation. The dissertation was called "Foster Children as adults" and it was based on statistical analyses. In Sweden 3-4% of all adults have been in foster care. One research question was: What are the social positions of adults who were in long-term-foster care as children compared to adults who grew up at home in families similar to the foster children's birth families? The basic design involved 107 foster children and 128 of their birth siblings who grew up in their mother's care. (Siblings have at least the same mother). Micro data from several national registers and local records on e g education, health, crime and social welfare were structured in 41 outcome variables. Statistical analyses revealed virtually no difference between the two groups. One conclusion could be that long-term foster care contains risk-factors such as insecure positions for foster children or problematic identity processes.

In modern research quantitative and statistical methods are used to study effects of different forms of treatment. This type of research is an important part in trying to introduce evidence based treatment methods into the social services.

Quite a new type of research has been done on salutogenic and health factors in the spirit of the Israeli professor Aaron Antonovsky. How can people, in spite of all the difficulties that life brings, recover and stay well? Which health factors can explain positive outcomes of an intervention? Here the researchers look for important positive factors to help high-risk groups, for instance children and youth suffering from behavioural disorder or drug abuse. Thus, this type of research can contribute to new social work practice.

6. Addiction and treatment of addicts

Addiction is seen as a serious social problem in Sweden and research within the field of addiction has a wide range, from looking at addicts living and life style to different ways of organizing treatment and national policies to control addiction.

I will give you two examples of research in this category. The first example is a study of drug users in a Swedish town. That study described the everyday-life of a group of drug users during three years. At the same time the researcher tried to answer the question why the drug users stayed in the addicts' life and what advantages that had compared to life in ordinary society. The material was collected through ethnographic fieldwork in places, where the drug users spent their time and is based on observations, in-depth interviews and records from courts and welfare committees. Why do the drug users continue to use drugs? According to the research drug users have their reasons for staying in the addicts' world. Well, it means misery, but the eventfulness, the short perspectives, the everything-will-work-out-fine attitude, the sense of competence and the artificial pleasure of the drugs is seen as a better alternative than ordinary life, which often means being alone, unemployed, poor, idle and the sense of being superfluous.

Quite another example of research in the field of addiction is a study on national - political level where the policies of Sweden and the Netherlands were compared. Swedish and Dutch drug policies are usually regarded as opposites. The goal for the Swedish drug policy is to create a "drug-free society"; while in the Netherlands a harm reduction policy prevails. The aim of the research was to study how the two countries reacted when the "modern" drug problem emerged in the western world in the 1960s. An underlying hypothesis for the study was that institutional traditions of formal social control are reproduced when a new social problem is established and they influence the problem definition as well as the action program.

The results of this study strengthen the hypothesis. The Swedish strong adherence to fundamentalist principles to the early policy on alcohol led by the central government was preserved in the country's drug policy. The Dutch experimentalist approach is a prolongation of that country's tradition of pragmatism and a restrictive role of the central state.

7. Concluding remarks

As you now understand Social Work in Sweden is a very broad discipline as regards theories, methods and problems chosen for research.

Which are the new tendencies that we can see?

1. Instead of dispersing funds to small individual research projects, a growing part of research funds is concentrating on centres or "excellent research environments" in which researchers from different disciplines and departments are involved. These research centres pursue research in areas especially of interest to the Swedish government. Some researchers at our school of Social Work are involved in three such centres at Lund university.
2. Concentration of resources is also seen in what we call Research schools. In a Research school different universities cooperate in giving courses and seminars for Ph D students in a certain discipline. These schools are becoming an important part of training for research, although we do not have a research school as yet in Social Work. But we have applied for funds to start such a school in order to concentrate our resources and to engage the best teachers. Research schools are complements to traditional training and not substitutes. Some of our PhD students take part in research schools established in adjacent disciplines.
3. Comparative research, where policies in different countries are compared, is very popular nowadays. Researchers in Social Work are involved foremost in studies with colleagues in other Nordic countries but also in projects financed by the European Union. More and more research will in the future be done in a European context and funded by the European Union.
4. For several years there has been a debate in Sweden on how to develop evidence-based social work i.e. how to use results from research in developing methods in practical social work. At the same time there has been a debate on how to exchange knowledge between theory and practice. As a result of these debates, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare announced funds for some full-scale experimental programs at a national level.

The aim of the programs was to develop structures to make a deeper and sustainable co-operation possible between the social services departments in the municipalities and the Schools of Social Work. The Schools are supposed to be more field-oriented and produce knowledge that social workers need. The social workers shall be more research-oriented, that is interested in using scientific knowledge in their work and interested in reading scientific articles, attending conferences etc. To achieve this, social workers must have more of research knowledge in their basic training. And that is what we now are trying to implement at Swedish schools of Social Work.

Evidence-based social work also means an interest in evaluations of practical social work. Research is nowadays done on methods of evaluation. Evaluations of practical social work have come more and more in focus in Sweden.

Diffusion and communication of research-results are nowadays seen as an important task for researchers in Sweden. Besides education and research this is called the “third assignment” for universities in Sweden. It is an official goal that universities, generally speaking, and consequently schools of social work should be an integral part of the surrounding community.