



## **Critical Social Work**

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# Critical social work – Considerations and suggestions

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### Abstract

Social work is often described as socially oriented, politically sensitive and as taking a critical approach to 'social problems'. However, recently we have seen how this self-image has lost ground. In the present article, we have discussed how demands for evidence and scientific evaluations of social work have gradually pushed the discipline and practice in the direction of psychological measurements and methods. Here, we will identify a problematic development within the social and theoretical practice of social work, and make some suggestions regarding how to start discussing, analysing and dealing with this changing social landscape. We will identify some critical points and issues and present models of how to think about and develop a critical social work practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Evidence, psychologization, social work practice, meta-theory, discursive-narrative

### Introduction

Social work as a practice and a scientific discipline deals with 'social problems'. These 'problems' are often complex, multidimensional, and inherently difficult to evaluate, assess, and attend to. Social workers are trained to take into consideration juridical, organizational, social, cultural, and psychological factors. Many of the text books used in social work can be described as cookbooks containing different and often contradictory theories, approaches, and methods. Social workers are encouraged to think in terms of improvisation, creative approaches and eclecticism in general (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002, 2005). However, there is also a need to think in terms of broaden the attention, stretching from a structural, and social perspective to a psychological and therapeutic perspective (cf. Dominelli, 2002a, 2004; Fook, 2002). Thus, a social-psychological perspective on social work is both necessary and vital for this kind of practice.

Social work is often described as socially sensitive, culturally oriented, and as taking a critical approach. Many of the international textbooks put a great deal of emphasis on critical thinking and theory. But there is also a considerable confusion regarding what we mean by

critical theory, thinking, and approaches. Feminists and postcolonial theorists have formulated a massive critique of social work for being both gender blind and for neglecting critical perspectives on power, ethnicity, and immigrants' social situation. Today, there are an increasing number of academic studies on these issues, showing that social work practices often are influenced by stereotypical views on gender and ethnicity (Burck & Daniel, 1995; Dominelli, 2008; Kullberg, 2002; Pringle, 2010; Sue, 2006). Whereas attention is being paid to issues of class, redistribution, and welfare, we often find a lack of perspectives on gender, ethnicity, lifestyle issues, and identity.

In many respects, social work seems to lack a social-psychological approach that makes it possible to deal with complex issues of power, different social positions, and contemporary lifestyle issues. Social workers increasingly orient themselves towards psychology and psychological methods and approaches. Many of the methods used in social work, for instance counselling in social work, are brought in from psychology and psychotherapy. This has several implications for social work practice.

In the literature on counselling in social work, there are seldom discussions on the obvious conflict between a therapeutic versus a critical perspective on social work practice. Payne (2006), for example, makes a distinction between three different approaches and focuses in social work: therapeutic, social order, and transformation. Even though this is a valuable distinction, Payne does not actively address the question of how to combine these different approaches and perspectives. Although he positions himself against "casual eclecticism" and for a thoughtful approach, it often seems to come down to how to choose between different theories and methods (Payne, 2005, p. 32). In light of the different evidence-based methods used in social work – which we will return to later on in the article – this approach becomes problematic. Consequently, we are left with a list of perspectives, but no analytical tools. This eclectic confusion is quite common in the literature. According to our view, this leaves the social worker with no direct tools to analyse and critically evaluate how to combine different methods and approaches to social problems.

An effect of this lack of a more comprehensible theoretical framework can be seen in the distribution, extension, and prevalence of various psychological methods and tests in social work today. For instance, in the Nordic countries the discussion on evidence has been coloured by a positivistic, psychological, and narrow approach to methods of evaluation (Blom, 2009). We can also see how the *therapeutic gaze* has a great impact on how social workers evaluate and attend to their clients. This leads to a tendency to mould and transform social problems into psychological and psychiatric problems. There is a parallel discussion on how popular psychology, soaps, and reality shows influence people in everyday life. Some researchers claim to have witnessed a widespread *psychologization of everyday life* (Rose, 1999).

In the present article, we will both identify a problematic development within the social and theoretical practice of social work and make some suggestions regarding how to begin discussing, analysing, and dealing with this changing social landscape. This is mainly a theoretical work, and we will use examples and relevant literature in order to develop our thoughts. The authors' own position is that it is important to use a constructivist, contextual, and societal approach to enable these questions to be addressed. Hence we will identify some critical

points and issues, and additionally we will present models of how to think about and develop a critical social work practice using this approach. In the first section, we will further describe and develop our thoughts on the continuous psychologization of social work today, and identify some key areas. Thereafter follows a section on psychological methods, counselling, and the therapeutic gaze in social work. The next segment presents an approach to how social work could respond to and modify these psychological and therapeutic methods and theories by constructing a meta-theory. The section on *doing social work* presents and develops a possible theoretical approach to positional factors and their impact on social work. And finally, suggestions on how to practically develop a reflexive and critical social work practice will be presented.

### **Social work, individualization and evidence**

The main focus in social work has always been on the relationship between subjects and the social structures in which they live (Hough, 1999). Modern social work, however, may arguably be seen as having departed from analysing structural elements and moved towards more individualized elements. This orientation towards the individual as the problem-carrier seems to exclude a perspective on both power relations and on how different positions, for instance gender or class, affect both people's lives and the social work practice itself (cf. Dominelli, 2004, 2002b). At the same time, a massive push towards a so-called evidence-based social work practice (EBP) has emerged in most of Western society (Blom, 2009; Morago, 2006). This development has led to specific evidence-based programmes or manuals being brought in to solve a variety of 'social problems'. These programmes are often based on psychological or psychiatric theories on the subject.

A focus mainly on the individual actually has a long history in social work; it is by no means a new phenomenon. There has also been a close connection to psychology (cf. Gabriel, 2005). During the sixties and seventies, a focus on the societal and a structural perspective became more important in social work, even though the ideas certainly have a longer history than that. In Sweden for instance, social workers were directly involved in city planning, and social work was conducted as community work in the suburbs close to people's everyday lives (Sundh & Turunen, 1992). A similar development was seen during this period in, for instance, Great Britain (Pople, 1995).

Although this movement towards society took place, it seems as if an individualized focus on 'social problems' has re-entered as the dominant view in social work. When social workers investigate or make decisions, the centre of attention is an individualized and non-contextual subject. The social contexts in which subjects actually live their lives are therefore more or less absent in practical social work (Dominelli, 2008, 2004, 2002b). Positional factors such as gender, class, and ethnicity therefore run the risk of being neglected. This also means that structural injustice does not get enough attention or is analysed with regard to the effect it has on people's lives and problems. This development seems to be underpinned by what has become known as evidence-based social work.

Since the 1990s, social work, like many other professional and academic occupations during the same period, has faced increasing demands on efficacy, that is, scientific "proof" that

the treatments and assessments being used actually work. The inspiration behind this movement towards evidence-based social work practice mainly comes from the field of medicine and to some extent also from psychiatry (Blom, 2009). However, what evidence-based social work consists of is by no means clear or uncontroversial (Morago, 2006; Payne, 2005). Some suggest that EBP should not be seen as a way of applying research results directly to work with a client. Rather it should be seen as a way of working in itself, where individual clients are seen as research subjects (Mullen & Streiner, 2004). Others argue that EBP constitutes collaboration between the subject, the practitioner, and the best available support from research (Morago, 2006).

Regardless of how one wishes to define EBP, it has had real consequences for practical social work. One primary consequence is an increase in what could be called manual-based social work. Specific programmes, which have been tested using scientific methods, are being brought in to be used on clients or patients. The main critique of this development often concerns ontological approaches connected to the demand to find ‘proof’ of whatever works. The notion that the truth can be revealed is seen as rather positivistic and the notion that EBP is supposed to work on and with rational people as rather neo-liberal (Webb, 2001). Here, rationality is used in the sense that social workers are assumed to make the ‘right’ assessment and that the client is assumed to choose to react in the ‘right’ way. Given these assumptions, is it even possible to achieve an understanding of what works from one context to another, especially if we consider the fact that these contexts include people’s different thoughts, experiences, feelings, and power relations? Moreover, others have pointed out that these programmes themselves actually lack an empirical foundation and that they cannot respond to multifaceted situations in everyday life (for an overview see Holland, 1999).

Our point here is, however, that the focus on evidence-based social work and the programmes and manuals that comply with this idea seem to lead to an even greater focus on the individual subject. People – irrespective of context, structural aspects, or positional factors – are expected to respond equally to different programmes. In addition, many of the programmes are based on psychological theories of the subject. In Sweden, an ‘investigational method’, or rather a method with which to structure investigations (BBIC; Barns Behov I Centrum), is becoming widely spread. The method has its origin in the British method Looking After Children System (LACS or sometimes LAC), which was introduced in Great Britain in 1995 (Socialstyrelsen, 2006). Different versions based on LACS have also been implemented in countries like Australia and Canada (Kufeldt, Vachon, Simard, Baker, & Andrews, 2000; Wise, 2003). Without trying to evaluate the method itself, we would like to point out one aspect that is often overlooked in discussions. The method is based on specific theoretical assumptions on self and society. BBIC, for example, is based on attachment theory and social ecological theory. In addition to BBIC leading mainly to a focus on the individual and his/her closest family, it also leads to specific assumptions regarding positional factors such as gender and ethnicity.

Positive identity development requires access to role models of the same sex and ethnicity (Socialstyrelsen, 2006, p. 58 [our translation])

This specific programme or manual contains assumptions about gender and ethnicity that are strongly questioned from a feminist and postcolonial point of view (e.g. Hicks, 2008). The

question that arises here is: How can these programmes or manuals meet and work inside a critically based social work?

Before we take a closer look at how to begin addressing these notions, we are going to look more specifically at an example of a common practice. Thus, in the next section, we will focus on the role of counselling and on different techniques used in social work. We will show how the techniques being used often contribute to reductionism and to an inability to develop a critical approach to social work.

### **Counselling and society**

Most of the introductory books on counselling consist of what might be seen as a catalogue of different therapy methods and techniques. They are often presented as a smorgasbord of the worst kind, where no qualitative differences between different therapy methods are shown. In these books, representatives of different schools of thought – for example psychoanalysis, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and so on – describe their specific method and philosophy. No explicit differences are pointed out, and one is led to believe that all approaches are equally proven and legitimate. In the end, one may even get the impression that it all boils down to a simple choice of the method one likes best.

One example of such an introduction to counselling is the encyclopaedia written by Stephen Palmer – *Introduction to Counselling and Psychotherapy. The essential guide* (2001). The book consists of a series of separately written chapters that dwell on different methods and psycho-techniques. No specific comparisons between the different methods are made; instead we are only presented with a descriptive map. What is also common, however, is that some authors, instead of presenting a map, immerse themselves in a specific orientation. For instance, psychoanalytic theory still remains a strong influence in the counselling literature. In a book about how to talk to ‘difficult clients’, we get to follow a session with a patient who grew up in a family marked by recurrent conflicts and violence. Here, the therapist uses a classic psychoanalytical approach and is thus able to tie the young man’s problems and inability to manage his situation to various childhood traumas.

Counsellor: It sounds like you have had another bad week. Coming to these sessions seems not to help. It is as I am not able to do anything to help you to improve matters, even though I can see how bad things are. I was wondering if this helplessness was like the helplessness you might have felt as a child, watching your parents fight (Norton & McGavley, 1998, p. 117).

Today, however, psychoanalysis has lost some of its direct influence and has to some extent been replaced by other therapeutic schools. This applies to, for example, CBT, which has gained legitimacy through its roots in academic psychology and its strong connection to research (Kush, 2009).

Many authors inside the discipline are aware that there is a conflict between a critical approach to ‘social problems’ and social work, on the one hand, and the psycho-techniques that influence encounters and interviews between social workers and clients, on the other. This

conflict has been highlighted by, among others, Janet Seden in *Counselling skills in social work practice* (2005) and by Lisa Miller in *Counselling skills for social work* (2006). Although these writers do raise awareness of the conflict, their books also encourage social workers, in their encounters with clients, to use different therapeutic methods with an eclectic approach. Although these authors raise questions regarding power and structural issues that are actualized in encounters between the social worker and the client, they also fail to provide a critical assessment of therapeutic methods, approaches, and perspectives. To find critical views on society, we have to turn to other kinds of books on social work, with titles such as *Multicultural social work practice* (Sue, 2006) or *Modern social work practice. Teaching and learning in practice settings* (Doel & Low, 2005). These books deal with social work in a more general way, but they too lack discussions of counselling techniques and the therapeutic elements of social work.

Even though some attempts have been made to achieve critical meetings between psychotherapeutic activity and social work, it appears that these practices are kept relatively separate (see however Bennett, 2005; Healy, 2005). So, how can we discern counselling in social work? Is it possible to unite a more critical approach to social work with professional counselling? We will briefly touch on some differences between a therapeutic and a critical perspective on society, in order to then talk about on how we might be able to begin developing approaches and practices that avoid some of the pitfalls found in the therapeutic approach.

1. *A focus on the individual versus A focus on society.* Therapeutic practices and perspectives have their base and home in psychological theories on the subject. This is a matter of cognitions, emotions, and how one generally builds one's inner psychological community on an individual level. The individual is studied and analysed from its own perspective, not so much as a part of social communities or a specific society. On the other hand, a focus on society involves the individual as a social being and as a part of society and culture.
2. *Lack of context versus Awareness of context.* The therapeutic view largely lacks an interest in the social contexts in which people live and work. In other words, we may know relatively little with regard to how the individual is affected by family, work, leisure, and other social contexts. Moreover, the view shows no interest in how class, gender, 'ethnicity', and other social factors affect the psychology and life of the individual. When therapists or social workers show interest in contextual factors, it seldom involves a critical review of external influence, power, and social injustice. Instead, the focus is on how the individual handles these external influences on a psychological level. This could be contrasted with a societal perspective, in which social and cultural contexts are seen as important foundations in the understanding of human beings.
3. *Essentialism versus Constructionism.* Many critical approaches are based on constructionist ideas on the subject as a social, cultural, and historical construction. In the therapeutic literature, however, we find thoughts about how the subject 'really is', ideas about 'true human nature' and how you can grow or recreate authenticity and the essence of man. Theories of social construction offer alternatives to different assumptions

concerning the natural, psychological, and essential self. Instead of assuming a coherent, stable, and fixed self, constructionists investigate and explore how individuals – in certain social and cultural contexts, gradually and through social and cultural influences and processes – develop a social self.

So, how can we resolve this dilemma? One suggestion is that we create a framework, a meta-theory, based on a *discursive-narrative* foundation. This theoretical framework could be used as a way to classify, respond to, and even develop therapeutic techniques and approaches. Basically, it is a way to reinterpret and modify already available psycho-techniques from a critical, society-based, context-conscious, and constructionist meta-perspective. In the next section, we will clarify and deepen these thoughts further.

### **A meta-theory of social work practices**

Hans-Herbert Kögler (2007) writes, in an attempt to implement discursive theory in critical social work, that it is crucial to highlight the principals of the symbolic order in order to see and critically approach its effect on subjects. Discourses only exist through discursive practice that consists of symbolic regulations, which for the subject may in some ways be experienced as restrictive. For critical social work, the discursive practice has to be questioned and reflexively approached before the client's specific positions become the focus of attention, not the other way around (Kögler, 2007; cf. Nylund & Nylund, 2003). When talking about fatherhood, for instance, different discursive constructions of fatherhood have to be taken into consideration before the client's own view on fatherhood and how it relates to these discourses can be approached.

Using a meta-theory built on a discursive-narrative foundation means that individualized theories and methods have to be passed through a social-psychological spectrum, through which discursive power and difference are analysed. In short, theories or manual-based work has to be put in context by analysing the positional and structural impact on social situations. What theories and methods based on discourses and narratives often have in common is, among other things, their view on power and knowledge. First of all, knowledge is never constructed inside a psychological vacuum; instead it is made through specific social, political, cultural, and linguistic contexts (cf. Nylund & Nylund, 2003). To interpret the 'social problem' social workers encounter, these contexts need to be addressed. At the same time, methods, manuals, and theories themselves do not exist inside a vacuum; on the contrary, they too are part of ideologies and specific notions of the individual and society (Hare-Mustin, 1987; cf. Nylund & Nylund, 2003). These discourses also have to be addressed and critically examined. Second, these theories also highlight how the researcher, therapist, or social worker is always involved in constructing this reality (cf. Czarniawska, 1998; Nylund & Nylund, 2003). Consequently, the professional must also address his/her own positional impact on the encounter, as well as the impact of different therapeutic methods or manuals.

So how can we understand what happens between people if, as mentioned, many of the manuals and methods used in social work mainly tend to focus on the instant dialogue? This means that we, in order to completely understand the encounter between client and social



worker, have to find a way of looking at it through this kind of meta-theory. We have to develop an understanding of different perspectives on the encounter (see Figure 1).

Perspective:	Influence:	Contents:
Structural perspective	↓ ↑	Institutional and structural conditions, for instance laws, values, rules, etc.
Positional perspective	↓ ↑	Both actual and imagined influence of power - asymmetries, for instance: Class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, space, etc.
Relational perspective	↓ ↑	The actual interaction.
Perspective of experience	↓ ↑	Feelings connected to the encounter. How the participants experience the encounter.

Figure 1. Different perspectives on the encounter between, for instance, a social worker and a client.

First of all, all encounters take place under *structural* conditions. These conditions affect what is and what is not possible in the interaction between client and social worker. As a social worker, for instance, one has to adapt to the different laws, rules, and norms that govern working conditions. Another perspective is that the encounter is affected by *positional* factors such as class, gender, or ethnicity. This perspective could be seen as two-folded. On the one hand, positional factors could (but do not have to) affect the encounter owing to the 'nature' of the positional factors themselves. 'Being' a man or a woman in certain contexts could make a difference. On the other hand, positional factors could also affect the encounter owing to people's fantasies, imaginations, or prejudices concerning the value or meaning of positional factors.

There often seems to be a lack of awareness in social work of the concrete and actual role of the *relational-perspective*. The conversation takes place inside a social-psychological power-field, in which the relations are in many ways defined and pre-established through institutional terms, positions, power, and other conditions. Finally, there is a perspective that may sometimes be difficult to pin down, namely the *perspective of experience*. Because even if the encounter is surrounded, limited, and defined by a great many factors, this does not mean that it cannot be positive. This perspective highlights that fact that encounters characterized by empathy, an ability to listen to and ambitions to help another human being can have a great impact in themselves. Being listened to and taken seriously can mean a great deal for the psychological healing processes. However, different psycho-techniques often show us how to work exclusively from this perspective, and that this work alone will solve people's problems. But this is still not enough; helping has to be seen and understood through models based on an individual, cultural, and societal perspective.

These different perspectives could be used to understand psychological techniques and manual-based social work through a meta-theoretical viewpoint. They could also be seen as a tool used for analysing the different social contexts jointly experienced by a social worker and a client. We have now outlined the first step, creating a meta-theory that on an analytical level considers impact from structural, positional, and relational perspectives and also a perspective of experience. The next step concerns how to replace more static concepts and theories with more dynamic views or, in other words, how to practically implement the above-mentioned ideas. In the next section, we will use examples from the field of family therapy, counselling with families and views on gender in social work to further develop our critique and arguments.

### **Doing social work**

There is an extensive body of literature on family therapy and counselling. Much of this literature deals with different kinds of techniques that can be used to work therapeutically with families. These techniques range from system-theoretical perspectives and cognitive theories to psychoanalytic varieties of family therapy. There is also a considerable body of research literature covering the evaluation of treatments and comparisons between different techniques. When studying this literature, it is easy to observe the near total lack of discussions on, for example, gender and how this may influence and shape treatment. There is also a lack of discussion on how changes in what a family 'is' affects the 'technical' development of family treatment (for a more peripheral discussion, see Burck & Daniel, 1995; Hare-Mustin, 1987; Perlesz et al., 2006).

By introducing the concepts 'doing gender' and 'doing family', it becomes possible to take the next step towards 'doing professional conversations'. By seeing gender as a social construction, as something changeable and responsive, it becomes possible to reflect on the actual meaning of 'being a man' and 'being a woman'; it also creates opportunities to discuss equality, power, and potential change. In the same way, we shift the perspective from *having* a family to *doing* a family. Today the family is experiencing major changes, not only on a discursive level. A family is a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, and there is an ongoing permanent symbolic struggle over how to define the family. The family has often been seen as a guarantee for stability and order, but it has just as often been associated with conflicts and 'social problems'. Today, the family is placed right in the centre of a changing time (Hare-Mustin, 1987).

The discussions on family, therefore, return to the turbulence and complex changes the family as an institution has been through. Today, new questions about the family emerge: Should homosexual parents be allowed to get married and adopt children? Do 'immigrant families' treat their children in a certain way? How should we look at 'honour killings' and family culture? Is it even possible to talk about 'honour cultures'? Why are so many women battered in their families, in their homes? Do parents today need to attend family education courses in order to cope with family life? Is it good to listen to all the experts? Do these experts really know what they are talking about? What do families today really look like? As we become less and less sure of what a family is or should be it is interesting to try to understand and grasp this development. The contemporary family constitutes a challenge, an opportunity to achieve theoretical renewal

and to develop new concepts. This development also means that we should take steps towards talking about how we 'do' family (cf. Perlesz et al., 2006).

The general view on gender in social work practice has also been heavily criticized. Feminist research has shown how social work tends to strengthen a view on gender and sexuality as fixed and complementary (Kullberg, 2002; Orme, 2003; Zufferey, 2009). Men and women are seen as fundamentally different and always attracted to each other. This leads mainly to two things. First it leads to the way in which social work, as a practice, is organized. Male social workers tend to work in some areas, female social workers in others, and some treatments are reserved for boys and others for girls (Bates & Thompson, 2002; Kullberg, 2002). The other aspect is that gender and sexuality are not analysed enough in relation to clients' life situations (Brückner, 2002; Dominelli, 2002b; Orme, 2003).

Just as we need to take steps towards talking about 'doing family', we need to start talking about 'doing' other positional factors as well, for instance gender. Gender is not a dialectic position based on immobile assumptions; rather it represents a diversity of positions and perceptions (Hare-Mustin, 1987). Today, it is difficult to assert that gender is a simple question of being either a man or a woman, when everything from changes in positions and power-relations to sex-changes are a possibility. This leads, as work with families does, to a lot of questions: Are all women alike? How does the individual relate to gender, and what importance is it given? Why is it that women tend to be seen as victims when they come into contact with social work? How do we look at male prostitutes, and is male prostitution a 'social problem'? Are men and women equally good parents and do they need the same kind of support? Why is it that some treatments are offered to boys but not girls? How does our view on gender affect the treatments and assessments being made? The diversity in gender positions and the effect the practice itself may have on how gender is understood shifts the focus towards how we 'do' gender.

How then does this affect the social work practice and the actual treatment of clients? By starting a reflexive process, in which we replace static theories and perceptions with a more dynamic view on the 'doing' and action, we also create conditions for 'doing' professional conversations in a new way. It then becomes necessary to let a critical discourse on family, gender, and identity infuse social work practice. This means that we, among other things, have to confront and revise our therapeutic techniques. In the next section, we will suggest how a reflexive and critical social work practice could be developed and prepared.

### **A reflexive social work practice**

In order to implement a more dynamic view and place existing methods and manuals on a meta-theoretical foundation, as suggested above, we have to find ways to actively integrate this approach into practical social work. As mentioned, techniques, manuals, and methods also have to be seen as a part of cultural ideologies, and as discursive constructions. It is therefore crucial to develop a critical and reflexive way to deal with these models, manuals, conversations, and techniques.

What reflexive social work consists of may be debatable; Payne, for instance, distinguishes between reflective, reflexive, and critical work (Payne, 2005; cf. D'Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2007). Here we use reflexive work as a way to describe how different discourses and narratives are actively used to critically examine daily work. These discourses and narratives are used to self-critically review one's work with clients, one's own positions as a social worker, as well as different power-relations. This way of defining reflexive work is mainly inspired by feminist and post-colonial research. These research fields emphasize the importance of including different approaches to doing gender and ethnicity as well as other positional factors (cf. Payne, 2005). It is, however, problematic to assert that this kind of work can be achieved by a single individual. Reflexive work needs input from others if it is to be effective (Czarniawska, 1998). Therefore, it is important to create forums in which this type of work can be conducted in a transparent environment.

One way to develop this kind of critical and reflexive process in everyday work could be through regular conferences and theoretical seminars. During conferences, current questions regarding methods and other work-related issues could be raised and critically examined. Furthermore, they could be used to continuously modify and adapt various psycho-techniques in relation to social work and to a critical thought process regarding society, culture, and power. Another way to develop this kind of work could be to create specific research circles, in which daily work is reviewed and discussed. Research circles are mainly a Swedish phenomenon, with a history in the labour unions' involvement in Swedish labour market (Östlund, 2008). According to Östlund (2008), research circles involve a research question, systematic development of knowledge, and an attempt to change social practice. Research circles are mentioned here as an example of how it may be possible to develop critical and reflexive social work practice. The reason is that the approach has recently been implemented in a number of Swedish municipalities as a part of a project to develop gender-sensitive social work practice (Claezon, 2008). Every circle consisted of, apart from the participants themselves and one person chosen to lead the work, a researcher with experience in gender research. The purpose was to merge practical experience with up-to-date research in the hope of achieving reflection and deepened knowledge. In this example, we meet a social worker talking about how a young female client reacted to the treatment she had received from the social worker.

She (whom [the social worker] has had contact with over several years) said, that when I talked that much about her not exposing herself to destructive relationships, or being able to say no, or to make her own choices, etc., it sounded as if I saw them as vulnerable people. She said that they actually had lived a life where they were exposed to danger but because I always, over and over again, talk about these risks and 'dangers', it seems as if they always will be weak and exposed. As I see them as presumptive victims. Thus, I recreate gender as difference, where girls are weaker and more exposed to danger than boys are. I interpret this as if I, through my approach based on my values, am likely to consolidate subordination (Claezon, 2008, pp. 118, [our translation]).

Besides clarifying how problematic it could be to work with a gender-conscious perspective, the example also shows how an incipient reflexive work practice could take shape. The social worker in the citation has started to reflect over and question methods used in social work and the consequences these methods may have.

The research circles were organized such that the groups together, with support from a researcher and current research, formulated what might be seen as a kind of meta-theory. This theoretical framework was then used to critically examine the practical social work conducted by members of the group. The point is that the members themselves collect material and knowledge from the field of activity, which is then analysed together with a researcher in the research circle. The practitioners' experiences set the agenda in the circles, but the idea is also that these experiences should be managed scientifically. In the groups, theoretical and practical knowledge helped form specific plans concerning how gender-conscious work was to be conducted in the future (Claezon, 2008).

Through these kinds of research circles, a space is created in which a reflexive process towards more gender-sensitive social work practice could develop. Though social workers are often described as street level bureaucrats (e.g. Lipsky, 1977), the increasing influence from manuals and evidence-based social work may actually lead to less direct power for the individual social worker. If a municipality has accepted the concept of, for example, BBIC (i.e. The Swedish version of the Looking After Children System, as mentioned above), they have to stick to certain assumptions and ways of organizing their work. This does not mean, however, that social workers lack power to influence their work; it only suggests that it may be more difficult to ignore the models, manuals, or theories used. Furthermore, feminist and postcolonial research has shown how difficult it can be to reveal or oppose oppressive practices (Ahmed, 2007). This shows the importance of creating an environment in which critical, reflexive social work can be provided and in which it is allowed. Perhaps research circles such as these could be a way to develop such work.

### **Towards a critical social practice**

There are several contemporary tendencies and developments that affect and probably also lead to drastic changes in social work practices. In the present article, we have discussed how demands for evidence and scientific evaluations of social work have gradually pushed the discipline and practice further in the direction of psychological measurements and methods. This internal development and search for legitimacy and scientific credibility are also situated in and related to a much wider cultural transformation.

Professional development within social work is strongly related to societal and cultural processes, where popular psychology and therapeutic methods influence people in everyday life. Magazines, books, TV programmes, and lecturers offer easy and quick solutions to many psychological *and* social problems. Psychological and therapeutic ways of relating to the self and identity are becoming widespread, and increasingly more accepted. From a situation where psychotherapy was regarded as suspect and exclusive, we have a current situation where people are encouraged to seek psychological counselling and therapy. The psychological and therapeutic gaze is becoming gradually more and more accepted, and increasingly hegemonic. When talking about dysfunctional families, youth problems, drug-related problems, or even poverty and social exclusion, psychological and individualistic theories and models are used.

As we have argued, these different but related developments and transformations of everyday life have a great impact on social work. This development is also related to an

influential neoliberal agenda that transforms social problems at the structural and collective level to problems relating to individual performance and behaviour. The different social and professional tendencies and developments we have discussed here thus converge in a shift towards even more individually oriented methods and solutions to 'social problems'. Therefore, there is a serious need for a critical perspective on this development, and for alternative models of thinking about evidence, methods, counselling, and social practices. Although this development has been debated over the last couple of years from different points of view (cf. Dominelli, 2004, 2002a; Fook, 2002; Kögler, 2007; Parrish, 2010; Payne, 2005), our aim of the article is twofold. We wish to make the development towards a psychologization of social work even more transparent and open to criticism. But we also wish to suggest some potential tools and theoretical perspectives that can be used to counteract this development.

There is a great need for critical investigation and a possible toolbox that can be used to evaluate and to determine how and when to use different psychological and therapeutic concepts and methods. But this is not sufficient. The different methods also need to be adjusted and modified in order to fit into a social practice. We have suggested a *discursive-narrative approach* to social work. This implies a meta-theoretical perspective and ongoing self-critical evaluations. There is need for a continuous and critical discussion about methods, psychology, and levels of analysis. In order to avoid treating social problems as exclusively psychological phenomena, methods need to be adjusted to a social-psychological model of the relation between different levels of analysis and practices. Social workers often encounter individuals, and it is apparently easy to relate to psychological models and to suggest therapeutic solutions to complex situations. We argue that there is a constant need to reflect on how social categories and constructions influence different decisions and 'treatments'. Even though we deal with concrete and physical individuals, other levels of determination are also active in this particular face-to-face encounter. For example, when we meet a man who has battered his wife and created a dysfunctional family situation, we also need to consider structural levels of gender relations and power structures. What is a male role model, for example? Our thinking about these issues also influences our actions and the solutions we suggest for different 'social problems'.

We argue that the formulation of a critical meta-narrative guides us to a dynamic and relatively plastic model of thinking about social work practices. Instead of accepting and using different psychological methods and techniques, we work to modify and adapt these methods to particular circumstances and contextual factors. This work also includes an orientation towards social constructionist models of gender, ethnicity, and class. Instead of using gender or family as mute categories, we talk about 'doing gender' and 'doing family'. This also helps us avoid stereotypical categorizations and reductionist models of thinking. Process-oriented and dynamic thinking makes it easier to reflect on changes, ambivalence, and contradictory social phenomena. Gender, for example, is often thought about as the relation between feminine and masculine traits and characteristics. Doing gender instead means that we focus on transformations and hybrid constructions of gender. This dynamic way of relating to what are often seen as merely categories and stable positions will lead to a new way of doing social work.

A critical and discursive-narrative approach to social work will not result in any quick or objective answers to our questions and problems, but it will help us orientate in an increasingly liquid and complex social reality. Here, we are arguing for a sceptical, critical, and meta-

conscious position in social work. The development towards evidence-based programmes and psychological toolboxes promises objectivity and legitimacy, but this might be at the cost of losing social-psychological thinking about complex, liquid, and changing social and cultural conditions. When 'social problems' are transformed into individually related performances and psychiatric profiles, we need to regain our critical consciousness.

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