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Educating Resilient Social Work Professionals

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Abstract

This article deals with the concept of vulnerability in social work and how social work students understand the concept of professionalism. The article is based on an empirical study of social worker students and on an analysis of the literature used in the education. Theoretically, the article rests upon vulnerability theory, as elaborated by Martha Fineman. The analysis suggests that the social work students share an understanding of the client as vulnerable and of the social worker as not vulnerable. This understanding entails the view that the social worker is objective and somewhat distanced from his/her clients. The article argues that this understanding runs the risk of producing non-reflexive social work practitioners that are not aware of their own vulnerable position. In conclusion, we state that an understanding of professionalism centred on a shared vulnerability of all beings could bridge the often-used dichotomous understanding of the social worker as either “helper” or “authoritative bureaucrat” and thus lead to a more resilient concept of professionalism.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Professionalism, Social work education, Social work, Resilience.

Introduction

Though social work can broadly be understood as a profession¹, professionalism is a contested concept in social work, and neither social work literature nor social work education literature delivers an agreed-upon definition (Cornish, 2017; Gibelman, 1999; Hansen, 2010; Haynes & White, 1999; Mackey & Zufferey 2015; May and Buck, 2000; Walter, 2003; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008; Wiles 2013). Social work as a profession is relatively new and borrows language and understandings from more veteran professions and subjects such as law, medicine, psychology, and sociology (Doron, Rosner & Karpel 2008; O’Leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2012; Walter, 2003)²³. Neither the role of the social worker nor the objectives of social work can, therefore, be said to be clearly defined (Hardy 2015). It could even be argued that these inherent tensions are intrinsic to the profession (Clarke 1993; Cornish, 2017). This perspective leads to a continuous debate about “what social work is or should be” (Cornish, 2017, p.545) – and about how the social worker is positioned, we might add.

The foundation of the socialization of social workers takes place during education and training (Beddoe 2014). It is somewhat underexplored what role the specific content of the

¹ Sometimes social work is considered a semi-profession within the field of sociology (Eskelinen, Olesen & Caswell 2008). In the context of this paper, we do not distinguish between professions and semi-professions.

² Danish social work education has traditionally been comprised by the subject areas of law, social science, psychology, and social work practice.

³ Some countries use the term social worker as an umbrella term to cover different social professions (Payne, 2005). In Denmark, however, it is considered a profession obtained after attending social work education making you qualified to uphold positions within the field of trained social work that is dominated by casework with people in need of social assistance. It can also consist of community work or positions within organizations or central government.

education such as textbooks and didactical approaches to teaching play in how social work professionalism is enacted and played out, though the relationship between theory and practice have been the focus of some exploration and calls have been made for critical reflexivity and critical methodologies in social work education (Hunt et al., 2017; Karlson 2018; Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker 2018).

Many studies have concerned themselves with the organizational and managerial settings of social work institutions such as municipalities. Several of these studies show that social workers are caught in an uneasy nexus of care and control (e.g., Hardy 2015; Høilund & Juul 2005; Järvinen et al. 2002; Järvinen & Mik Meyer 2003; Juhila et al. 2003; Nissen et al. 2018; Mik Meyer 2004; Nissen et al. 2007; Postle 2002; Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2018). Other studies point to a complicated relationship between professional identities that stresses attention to human needs, social justice, and social change on the one hand, and managerial pressures and institutional tasks and goals on the other hand. This can be tied to inherent tensions in the fields in which social work is practiced, e.g., municipalities (Baadsgaard et al., 2012; Cornish 2017; Jørgensen 2019).

As e.g., Lynch & Forde (2016); Moriarty et al (2011) as well as Tham and Lynch (2014, 2019 & 2020) shows newly educated social workers can experience a discrepancy between the theory of school and the work of practice and can feel that they are not adequately prepared for the complexity of practice. Other studies show that the political climate and attitudes towards social work practice play a vital role in developing a professional identity for newly educated social workers (Hunt et al., 2017). The potentially problematic meeting between theory and practice is also identified as connected to competing understandings of social work in theory and practice (Denvall and Skillmark 2020; Hicks 2016; Higgins et al. 2016).

All three of us have experiences with a perceived discrepancy between theory and practice on a personal level connected to when the students enter field education. We have all experienced students that came back to school from field education and talked about facing a practice in which they had a hard time connecting theories of social work to the realities of practice. These experiences made us curious about how social work education's theoretical curricula teach the role and profession of social work and how social work students conceive professionalism in light of this context.

We also want to explore how the meeting with practice affects how the students engage with and understand their professionalism. In order to shed light on this, we conducted an empirical study in two parts. One part consisted of analyzing the curricula to examine how this literature presents the social worker's professional role. The other part consisted of workshops with two classes of social work students and a group interview with four social work students. To further explore how the meeting with practice influenced the students' understanding, the student participants were either on their way to commence field education or had just returned from field education.

Outline of article

To place the education and its curricula in its context, we begin with a brief outline of how social work has developed from a primarily philanthropic task to an increasingly regulated and specified trade tied to the welfare state and how this has influenced the education of professional social workers. This leads us to conclude that social work in a Danish context is heavily connected to and dependent on the welfare state. This background is important in understanding how a potential conflict between care and control plays out in a Danish context. The interdependency between social work and the welfare state has tied social work to particular understandings of legality and bureaucracy that are significant to the role of the social workers and their relationship to the people in need of their assistance. This

role is rooted in understandings of professionalism that values detachment and disembodied rationality. After this, we describe the theoretical concepts of vulnerability and resilience, as Martha Fineman defines them. Martha Fineman's approach to vulnerability as a shared ontological condition and the resilience that society can provide as a counterweight to this vulnerability will serve as the theoretical foundation for a dialogue with the empirical findings.

Looking at the empirical material, we find that the theoretical understanding carried forth in the curricula of social work education catches the students in a paralyzing stronghold between care and control, which leads the students to be caught in a 'powerless relationalism' in which they feel unable to take on the responsibility of their work. We further find that vulnerability theory serves as a counterweight to this powerlessness and offers a way of exceeding the dichotomic description of the social worker as caught between being either a bureaucrat or a helper. In the conclusive remarks, we make some tentative suggestions for how social work education could further a notion of professionalism founded in the shared vulnerability of human beings to strengthen the resilience of the coming professionals.

Contextualizing transformative expectations in ESE research

Professional social workers and social education in a Danish context

It can be argued that social work came into being in the late 1800s based on philanthropic principles of help in particular for those who showed a "moral will" understood as a matter of responsibility, autonomy, and (economic) self-dependency (Villadsen 2004a, 2004b, 2005 & 2007). However, the first social work education in Denmark was established in 1937. The education was initially concerned primarily with educating social helpers to provide guidance to single mothers and patients at psychiatric hospitals (Gamst & Gamst, 2008). This

history was connected to several social policy reforms during the 1930s and forward that had the purpose of providing individually tailored help to individuals and families⁴. Since then, social work has become more and more heavily regulated, though the rules have varied in intensity (Dalberg-Larsen, 2009; Hielmcrone & Schultz, 2010).

There have always been possibilities for professional discretion within the legal rules. However, the scope has varied through time, as shifting policies emphasized either legal prescription or administrative discretion (Greve, 2002). This tension between discretion and prescription, situated decision making and predictability and help and control, can be said to have been characteristic of social work from its beginnings until now (Caswell & Larsen 2015; Greve 2002; Høilund, 2002 & 2006 Klausen 2002; Schultz 2004; Villadsen, 2004; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003). Danish social work education, in our view, shares this tension. On the one hand, it has retained strong elements of a professional identity tied to notions of help and guidance: Notions initially founded in philanthropic understandings and later also in ideas of empowerment by eliminating societal inequality (Villadsen 2004a, b, & c)⁵. On the other hand, it is based on ideas of legality and bureaucracy founded in the continental belief in the rule of law (Tollenaar & de Ridder, 2010; Henrichsen, 2010).

In Denmark, social workers have and have had the municipalities as their main place of work. The municipalities are local governments tasked with supplying and providing tax-

⁴ The loss of rights previously connected to receiving assistance was furthermore diminished. Though the laws still to some extent separated deserving individuals from undeserving, the reform was at least partially based on an idea of individual rights based on established 'objective' criteria as well as a simplification of the previous rules concerning public help (Fredriksen, 2016; Rasmussen, 2017; Rostgaard, 2013).

⁵ It might be argued that social work from the beginning has been tied to the contestations between liberal-individualistic and social-democratic/collectivistic definitions of social problems as well as political solutions to these problems (Ablett & Morley, 2016).

funded welfare services to their inhabitants. In the municipalities, social workers are understood as civil servants responsible for making decisions about and providing social care to people in need of assistance on behalf of the state. Following the social reforms of the 1930s, the municipalities were developed on bureaucratic principles of structuring and organizing the work defined by rules, hierarchy, and division of labor based on technical qualifications (Mik-Meyer 2017; Nørrelykke, 2009). Bureaucracy, it was understood, gives shape to principles of legal fairness, certainty, and equality before the law and constrains the arbitrary use of power. Decisions must be made according to the rule of law, and everybody must have the same access to a rights-based public service knowing what obligations are expected of them in return (Tollenaar & de Ridder, 2010; Henrichsen, 2010).

To a certain extent, the social work profession has challenged the understanding of “state”-based legal social work, particularly in the heyday of critical social work in the 1960s-1970s. Critical social work questions whether social work should be an instrument of adjusting and normalizing people to existing society (Villadsen, 2004c). Villadsen has argued that after a period of belief in universal welfare and the possibility of “normalization” by eliminating societal inequality, the philanthropic notion of moral re-education is resurfacing in modern social work. The social workers view their endeavors as helpers concerned with the client’s will to act on his or her own “problems.” The person receiving assistance is thus envisioned as an autonomous and inviolable individual. However, at the same time, certain characteristics are isolated as to be worked on, e.g., the client’s relationship to work, to him or herself, etc. The use of direct force is viewed negatively. It is understood as a last resort only to be used in situations where the client does not want the “right” things for him or herself – or if the actions taken by the client are at risk of causing serious harm to the client (Villadsen, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005). A host of other scholars have shown that social workers in practice use disciplinary power to individualize problems and make help

dependent on the client's selfhood and willingness to internalize the values of the system (e.g., Carstens, 2002; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003; Mik-Meyer, 2002, 2004 & 2017).

Danish social work education today

Today in Denmark, social work education is conducted in what is called “professional schools.” A social work degree obtained from such a school is considered a (professional) bachelor's degree and will provide qualifications for entry into a master-level university degree program.

Although education may vary in didactical approaches across the schools, the learning objectives that a student must fulfill to become a social worker are stated at the national level. This centralization enables social work students to switch professional school without missing out on core issues of social work. The written learning objectives of the education reflect the ties between social work and the welfare state (Ringø et al 2018). The learning objectives reflect the notion that social workers are public servants and agents of the state (Larsen, 2011). The learning objectives, e.g., state that the students must obtain knowledge about the welfare state and the social work profession. The objectives specify that the students must be able to obtain knowledge about ‘correlation between effects, quality, and economic cost’ and ‘take action in a legally and fiscally realistic and responsible way’ (Studieordningen, 2015). It is also clear from the learning outcomes that social workers and people receiving assistance are envisioned in distinct and defined roles. E.g., it is stated that the student must learn to “identify social problems and that people coming into contact with social services and social workers are people who are particularly vulnerable and have social problems that must be rectified” (Studieordningen, 2015).

Because of the legalistic nature of social work and its close connection to the (welfare) state, we argue that the professional practice of social work has based its interpretations on a notion of a rational, autonomous liberal legal subject with individual legal rights and

obligations. Bureaucratic notions of professionalism have to do with the division of powers, hierarchical obedience and rational decision making within the confines of positive law (Andersen, 2016; Revsbech, 2012).

On top of this, social workers in bureaucratic institutions like municipalities are increasingly being met with the demands of organizational and managerial professionalism (Christensen, 2013; Hirvonen, 2014; Liljegren, 2012; Morley and Ablett 2016; Nordegraaf 2007 & 2016; Reindeers, 2008). These pressures involve the demands of “cost control; targets; indicators; quality models; market mechanisms, prices, and competition” (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 763). Likewise, they are met with demands of “technical rationality” (Schön 1983, p. 21), that is, “problem-solving made rigorous” by methods, techniques, and evidence-based scientific theory (Nordegraaf, 2007 and 2016; Christensen & Madsen, 2018; Schön 1983, p. 21 quoted in Nordegraaf 2007).

This development can be criticized for overlooking human embodiment and embeddedness (Hirvonen, 2014). As Kuhlman suggests, the many external checking mechanisms transform professionalism. It is no longer embodied in the professional but rather becomes “disembodied” and “produced through the professional” (Kuhlman, 2006 quoted in Hirvonen, 2014, p. 579). The checking and reporting disassociate the professional from care (Hirvonen, 2014). This has been tied to the management reforms (Hirvonen 2014), but it also could be argued that it links back to the idea and ideals of public servantry and to legal liberal epistemologies (Mik-Meyer 2017). The law in this framework of understanding is understood as disembodied, abstract, and neutral (Fineman 2013; Kearns and Sarat 1998; Priel 2012; Hirvonen, 2014), and social workers are expected to adhere to the political goals and values of the state and the municipality even when these values are not in congruence with professional ethics and personal values (Larsen, 2011).

Vulnerability as a shared ontological condition of social workers and people receiving assistance

In this article, we apply the criticism of Martha Fineman and vulnerability theory to discuss the implications of our empirical material. Fineman opposes and critiques the prevalence and influence of legal liberalism and its focus on individual freedom and equality (Fineman 2008 & 2020). The legal liberal subject is shaped around an understanding of an individualized, autonomous, self-preserving, disembodied, disembedded, rights-bearing, and legally capable subject (Fineman 2008, 2013, 2017 & 2020)⁶. In her work on vulnerability and in opposition to what she describes as the myth of autonomy (Fineman 2004), Fineman conceptualizes the vulnerable legal subject, which we find helpful in our analysis of how the social worker students construct the relationship between the social worker and the people receiving assistance.

Vulnerability in Fineman's conceptualization is not connected to "specific instances of victimhood," hardship, or marginalization (Fineman, 2017, p.3). Rather, vulnerability is a constant and universal condition of being alive because all living "embodied beings" are "susceptible to change and alteration" (Fineman, 2017, p.4). In Fineman's perspective, all embodied beings are vulnerable (Fineman, 2008, 2013 & 2017; Fineman & Gear, 2013), and as such, no "condition of invulnerability" can be found (Fineman, 2017, p.4).

The counterpart to vulnerability is not invulnerability but resilience. Resilience allows us to address and confront whatever change we encounter. Resilience in Fineman's perspective, is not just a matter of personal adaptation linked to individual characteristics and behaviors. We are not born resilient (Fineman 2012; Fineman 2020). On the contrary, the

⁶ The legal liberal subject has been criticized widely within feminist theory see for example: Hunter (2013)

understanding of vulnerability as a shared foundation that no one can avoid underscores the role of society and society's institutions in creating resilience (Fineman, 2008; Fineman & Katzin, 2016). Vulnerable beings are always both “embodied and ineluctably embedded in lived actualities and material conditions” (Gear, 2013, p.49). This makes us dependent on our connection to each other and the social, economic, and institutional realities of which we are a part (Fineman, 2008, 2013 and 2017; Gear, 2013; Jydebjerg 2017). “Resilience is produced within and through institutions and relationships that confer privilege and power” (Fineman, 2017, p.6). Resilience thus stems from our interactions with each other and society (Fineman & Gear, 2013; Fineman, 2012, 2013 & 2017; Jydebjerg, 2017).

Laws play a vital and powerful role in creating possibilities of resilience as laws establish and maintain our societal obligations and rights. Laws shape our relationship with each other by the way that they confer privilege and burden. Law regulates what kinds of resilience enhancing institutions, such as education, health, social assistance, etc., society provides. The law also regulates social obligations such as tax, work, and financial self-sufficiency and how these obligations are dispersed across members of society (Fineman 2012; 2013 & 2020).

Welfare professionals like social workers are pivotal in creating access and connection to the societal institutions and organizations that can provide resilience by dispersing rights and obligations (Fineman, 2017). In the article, these theoretical considerations and approaches to human lives constitute our main theoretical apparatus. Our research methods unfolded below is designed to address how vulnerability and

understandings about the relationship between social worker and people applying for assistance among social worker students.

Research method

The empirical study rests on two student workshops, a group interview, and an analysis of the textbooks of the education. The focus of the study was to examine how students conceive professionalism and their role when meeting the person applying for or receiving assistance. We conducted two workshops with two classes of social work students who were asked to participate in a group discussion about professionalism and the role of the professional towards the persons encountering social work. As part of the research process, the students were informed of the purpose of the study, and they were informed of the possibility of withdrawal from the research process at any time. We followed the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014)⁷.

The classes had been through teaching modules focusing on social work as a profession, the social worker's role in society, and social work practice in different workplace settings. One class was in their fourth semester (module 7) just before starting up their practical training⁸. 59 students participated. The other class had just returned from practical training and was commencing their fifth semester (module 8). 31 students participated. These semesters were chosen to see if and how the students changed their views about professionalism and their role as professional social workers after their first meeting with actual social work practice

⁷ There are – of course – several other issues connected to research integrity (for instance: being honest, avoiding cherry-picking, representing the informant's views in respectful manner etc.) than the space of the article allows us to elaborate upon.

⁸ Social work students in Denmark do a semester of practical training as part of the education. The education is a 3.5-year bachelor education. The practical training takes place in the fourth semester (year 2).

outside the school. Therefore, we wanted to talk to students just before and after their practice training to see if and how their understanding differed.

We asked the students to write a definition of professionalism. We further asked them to draw a meeting between a social worker and a client. We then analyzed the drawings to illuminate how the students visualize how a social worker and a client are positioned in connection with each other. We chose drawing as a research method to “enrich and extend language-based cognitive knowledge,” in particular about points that were “not easily articulated through language” (Roberts & Riley, 2014, p.292). As a supplement to these materials, we conducted a group interview of four social work students. We carried out the interview in order to be able to address and unfold some of the understandings reflected in the drawings. Two students were on their third semester before practical training, and two students were on semester four and in practical training. The interview was a face-to-face, semi-structured thematic interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) and conducted at the school where we teach. The interview lasted one and a half hours. We used a topic guide to explore the students’ understandings of professionalism and social work. We made the topic guide based on a preliminary analysis of the drawings and written definitions that the students had made in class. For instance, we asked about the students' perception of “professionalism” and how they would describe professionalism within social work. We chose to do a group interview to create an element of learning and thinking and enable the students to build on each other’s practical and theoretical knowledge. We anticipated that the group dynamic would resemble the dynamics of learning in both a class and work environment where the students would normally engage with professionalism or professional conduct. We wanted to tap into a different layer of understanding by creating this group dynamic than the individual drawing and writing exercises had given us access to (Doody, Slevin, and Taggart 2013). We used emerging tentative thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of meaningful patterns

(Kvale & Brinkmann 2015) in the interview analysis and identified key themes as they emerged.

Methodological approach to textbook analysis

Epistemological stances

As mentioned in the beginning of the article we began our research by looking at how the textbooks of the education deals with social worker professionalism. We have exclusively looked at textbooks used in the modules before practical training. Our aim with this was to investigate how the students are prepared for practice before they meet it. Before the practical training, the students have six modules. Three modules (modules 3, 4, and 5) are about the main target groups of social work: people outside the regular workforce, people with disabilities and adults, children, and families in marginalized social positions. Three modules (1, 2, and 6) are about the practice of social work, the role of the professional, and the framework within which social work is practiced.

The textbooks that we analyzed are common curricula that all the students in our school must read. We, therefore, decided that the textbooks would be a good place to see how we introduce the students to the topic of professionalism and the role of the social worker since it could be argued that they represent the “institutional understanding” as it is the understanding that all students encounter through their classes. Danish social work education has four main subject areas: social work, law, social science, and psychology. To explore how professionalism is taught, we have examined textbooks from all four knowledge areas from the modules (1, 2, and 6). As modules 3-5 are concerned with social work methods in light of specific target groups, we have not included the literature from these modules in the article.

Further, it is important to stress that only the chapters included on the reading list of the syllabi are included in the analysis. The books may have a wider scope of subject matter and content than we write about here. The conclusions concerning how the book describes and

outlines professionalism are therefore not so much a reflection of the books as they reflect the choice of materials.

We have not merely read for where professionalism is explicitly mentioned. We have deployed a thematic analytical scheme in which we looked for themes such as how the books talk about social work, the institutional framework of social work, and how social work can and should be practiced. We did this by identifying the places in the curricula where these themes were addressed. We then took notes of how the social worker's role and professionalism were described in particular by looking at how tasks and duties were described and how the social worker's professional role could be read and understood from these descriptions.

Textbook professionalism

In our analysis we identify a clear division between law/social science books and social work books. The law books are focused on rules and obligations on the social worker and the person applying for assistance. They explain the content of various rules concerned with how social workers are obligated to act when handling cases. That is, obligations like processing cases as fast as possible, duties of confidentiality and the duty to sufficiently examine a case to make a correct decision (Andersen, 2016; Jensen, 2011; Hagelund, 2016). It seems that it will always be possible to reach a correct decision and that this will happen if all the rules of casework are followed. These books are in line with a traditional continental understanding of bureaucracy defined by rules, hierarchy, and labor division based on technical qualifications. In this understanding, a social worker is a civil servant tasked with making decisions on behalf of the state. They work for municipalities.

Municipalities are understood as being a part of the executive power. The executive power should always be exercised within the confines of the law. The law is an expression of the legislative power. According to the law, it is the executive power's task to exert these

laws correctly in the encounter with the people who have either rights or obligations. The executive power is obligated to follow the laws (Andersen, 2016; Hagelund, 2016; Hansen, 2015; Ketcher, 2014). Furthermore, social workers are seen as civil servants/public employees and part of a hierarchical system with a duty to be loyal to their employer (Revsbech, 2012).

The social science books perspective also deals with how social work in municipalities is organized in a somewhat rationalistic perspective. Further, they describe how budgets are administered, negotiated, and thus carried out at the municipality's street level. None of the books are concerned with social work outside public service. The legal and rationalistic perspectives of the books reproduce an image of social workers as rational decision-makers that can reach objective decisions uninfluenced by their embodiment and embeddedness.

The social work books present a considerably more varied picture of the role and professional obligations of social workers. The task of making legal decisions is not in the foreground of the story that is told. Legal rules and standards for casework are predominantly presented critically as something that may increase the rule of law and legal security, but that also runs the risk of hampering “good” social work (Alminde, Henriksen, Nørmark, & Andersen, 2008). The help, guidance, and treatment aspects of social work are in the foreground of the story about social work told in the social work books. Parts of the literature offer guidance on how to respond as a therapist, but seldom entail social work as a profession. The focus here is mainly on how to ask different questions and communicate with the client, as well as how to take a decentered position and thereby let the client become an agent in his or her own life (within a therapeutic context). A few lessons are concerned with

aspects of the psychological working environment and offer advice on managing a stressful working environment.

There is seemingly a lack of theory formation and literature originating from social work itself on how to relate to the client. This entails that the curriculum concerning this topic is based on knowledge from the psychotherapeutic and psychological field, which predominately enhances an individualized focus on social problems (Morley and Ablett 2016).

The books seem to be either predominantly critical or presenting ways to go about actual practical social work, e.g., through methods, systematic casework, counseling, and user involvement. In the action-oriented books about practical social work, there is a big focus on the person applying for help and the possibility of change through help. However, this is rarely or not at all connected to what kind of possibilities for help the law makes available and what obligations are tied to this help.

The social workers in these books are understanding and empowering but not vulnerable. Vulnerability is mentioned in connection to compassion fatigue and stress within the social work profession as a pathological outcome of long-time work with clients and not something to be sought after. The books of a more critical nature encourage social workers to be reflexive about their work and role in relating with the client but offer little guidance on how to go about this on a concrete level in the actual circumstances where social work occurs.

Studying for a (municipal) profession

In the interviews, the students express that they are entering into a profession because they clearly articulate that social workers can do something that no other profession can do. They compare themselves favorably to the professions that are a part of the social work curriculum, such as law and psychology. They talk about how social workers can see “the entire

picture” (interview). If the municipalities did not hire social workers, “they would have to hire one psychologist, and one sociologist and one lawyer to do the same work as a social worker can do” (interview). They especially connect this to an ability to see a problem from all angles and see, understand, and act upon a person’s entire range of problems (interview).

The students use the Danish word “borger,” which would roughly translate "citizen." However, you can be a “borger” without having citizenship. Another way of translating the word would be "subject." Subject, in our view, has many of the same connotations as "client." The students were very determined that the word client should not be used. We use the word “person” here in the sense of a human being accepted as belonging to a political community of other human beings giving them access to a particular system within some demarcation lines – in this case, the Danish municipal system of social assistance.

The students stress that a professional social worker must have a certain kind of knowledge that is required to exercise the tasks of the profession. In particular, the students stress the law and the ability to navigate within the framework of the law. In connection to not being personal and not necessarily choosing the solution that, on a personal level, seems right:

To present the long arm of the law nicely and decently (written definitions).

To show an understanding of the person but at the same time, stay within the confines of the law (written definitions).

Of course, you are human, but to be professional to me means to look beyond your position and your feelings and decide based on the law (group discussion).

The drawings very much envision that social work takes place in particular institutional settings. Almost all the drawings depict a table with a (happy) social worker at one end of the table and a (depressed looking) person applying for assistance at the other. Only six students envision a meeting that takes place in less formalized settings, e.g., outside, in a café, or someone’s living room. This situation is interesting because the students were asked to draw a

meeting between a social worker and a person. However, we did not specify what role the social worker should have nor where the social worker was employed. The students are either on their way into practical training or have just returned from practical training. This practical training takes place in many other places than in municipalities. Some students have been in practical training in places where they did not represent public power and authority, e.g., voluntary organizations, residential accommodation, and women's shelters. Yet, it seems that the students in their drawings are in almost unanimous agreement that social work is conducted behind a desk in an office (although many make the desk friendlier with flowers, coffee, or water). The social worker is often writing or has either pen and paper or a computer in front of her/him. This particular positioning of social work is also reflected in the interview:

We administer the municipality and the political guidelines. It is with them as a starting point that we assess a case so that we also attend to those interests... we have to uphold the law, the budget... the organizational framework (interview).

We're frontline workers, and we're passing on a system and instructions that we have a bit of influence on but not as much as we would like (interview).

The use of the word frontline worker properly reflects part of the literature in module 6, inspired by Michael Lipsky (1980). The module addresses the potential cross-pressures that particular social workers employed in the municipalities face. However, it seems that the students have internalized or at least "accepted" this cross-pressure as a "modus operandi" of the municipality that cannot be changed or challenged. As such, the social worker is seen as powerless and facing the impossibility of action beyond what the law and the outlined level of service in the specific municipality allow them to do.

It is also interesting that though stick people dominate the bodies of the figures in the drawings, it is obvious from the drawings which bodies are social worker bodies and which bodies are bodies of people receiving assistance. Social worker bodies are connected to

artifacts such as tables or computers. The bodies of people receiving assistance are mere stick bodies.

Wearing the professional cloak

It generally seems that the students are very influenced by the bureaucratic understanding of the objective and detached public servant in understanding their future role. Professionalism is something that you can don on top of your “real self” hidden underneath, and that can influence but should not be allowed to influence too much. Professionalism is something that you can turn on and off, or tune-up and down depending on the situation and the person whom you are meeting with:

When you have a conversation with a person, you have read up on what it is about the case. You know that, okay, it could be someone filled with depression and anxiety, and then you know you have to be more careful, and then you will choose that approach to that person (interview).

You can choose to “put yourself in play,” or you can choose not to. Being professional seems to be something you can put on or take off like a garment. One student in the definitions writes about wearing the right hat. Another student talks about putting on a cloak: Well, it’s when you put on your professional cloak and sort of respond to that and don’t involve your private life or your opinions in a case (interview).

Separating the private from the professional is an important point for the students. The necessity of this separation is stressed in the written definitions, the group discussions, and the interview. The point is made in relation to private or personal viewpoints, feelings, experiences, etc. These should be separated from the professional and not be articulated:

‘Well, what you have with you plays a role as experience, but it would be a very negative role if you involved it in your work’ (interview). The social worker must

neither act on his or her feelings nor show them. It is also stressed that you should not ‘bring your work home with you’ (interview).

Furthermore, a distinction between professional and private is connected with the relationship between the social worker and the person applying for assistance. The students write and talk about a necessary distance to the person applying for help. The person receiving help should not be allowed to access the social worker beneath the professional surface:

You can be personal without it becoming personal. So, if you’re with a person, then you can relate in some ways but still do it on the surface (interview).

Personal is when you can relate to something but are moving on a surface level, which can be generalized to everybody. Private is when it’s private information about yourself (interview).

Here the professional role is somehow detached from yourself as a (private) person or your “true self,” which is put away when you go to work. You can then access this self underneath the professional surface at will and “use” it if it seems pertinent. You can put yourself away in the drawer and instead put on your professionalism. Social work students are presented with a professional perspective labeled “the three P’s” (Professional, Private, Personal). Especially in a Danish context, a distinction between “the three P’s” has been promoted to create a professional approach towards the citizen in vulnerable positions (Jappe, 2010; Mørch, 2004). Even though this perspective is taught only in a single lesson, it seems that it plays an important role in understanding professionalism and how to protect oneself from vulnerability. It is important, given that the perspective is taught with special attention to realizing the distinction of the three P’s, not least the feasibility of deploying such a simple concept in social work.

However, it seems that the students take the words for granted and do not reflect upon the function of the concept. Rather, the students’ distinction of the three P’s points towards the fact that they consider themselves invulnerable. However, there may be courses of action where you can put yourself at risk of being vulnerable, namely when you divert from the

professional path and into the private and personal realm. From a vulnerability perspective, this distinction between different kinds of spheres of yourself becomes a redundant term. Since there is no state of invulnerability, it is impossible to create a space within yourself and between you and the social worker where invulnerability exists.

Helping the helpless become something other than they are

When asked about the purpose of social work, the students' answers revolve around helping. The people at the receiving end of their help are envisioned as vulnerable and fragile (interview). Though the students stress that it should not be shameful to get help, getting help is connected to a sense of loss of control.

And I'm thinking that when you're out there, well, the last thing you would do is to contact the municipality or the crisis center. You would try a lot of other things first. It's vulnerable to go there. They must feel that they're putting their lives in someone else's hands. Well, now it's you guys that will decide what my future will look like (interview).

Whereas usually your life is in your own hands, you are not depending on help from 'the social system' and you can make your own decisions for your life. This is also the position that social work should bring the person back to. This position is also one that social work should bring the person back to. Back to being in control over yourself and your family and having a job to support yourself. The students do acknowledge that everybody is vulnerable, and that hardship could happen to everyone. However, a certain kind of dread about becoming vulnerable themselves seems to be connected to how they position themselves in relationship to the person receiving assistance. In the interview, a story about a person who was in an accident and had a brain injury is told with bafflement and dread: "to go from being what we consider a normal human being to being well... to need... to be that disabled." It is acknowledged that this could happen to everyone, but that only makes the dread and the necessity to stay on the right side of the line between help and control that much more pertinent.

Social work comes into play when something happens that disturbs the norm and is understood as having the purpose of helping people to “get back to normalcy,” which is to be in control (interview). According to the students, the person being helped is not a client because “that word denies the person his or her capacity to act” (interview).

Powerless relationalism

The students juxtapose professionalism with relationships. The students are very aware of how they envision the person applying for help should be treated. They use words like being open, without prejudice, listening, understanding, and tolerant (definitions).

You have to be able to be personal to be able to relate to the person. Otherwise, it would become a monologue. That is, the person would feel that they were talking to a wall because you’re not reacting, not going into the conversation but only pursuing the agenda that you’re interested in if you stay professional because there it’s about getting the facts or the agenda you have made by ignoring the two others (the personal and the private). Well, that would be almost cynical (interview).

The relationship to the person applying for or receiving assistance seems to be something that can be destroyed by professionalism. You can focus on the case, or you can be professional. You can decide how professional you want to be or how personal:

Our approach to the person will be different. Where I might think, well, we can build a relation through humor, and that’s how we can get the best relationship you might be more like, well, we can talk to each other, but it shouldn’t be to... because we have to focus on the case. So, there might be a big difference (interview).

Some will get right down to business and be very, well, very much the professional (interview).

Being professional is about getting down to business, although this may hamper the relationship between the social worker and the person receiving assistance. As illustrated above, it seems that closeness and personal investment are the opposite of professionalism, and it is important to “shed yourself” – put yourself aside to act professionally. This understanding

is akin to a traditional legalistic bureaucratic view on professionalism as presented from the law in the textbooks. Professionalism is equated with rationality, autonomy, boundaries, and choice. However, at the same time, it seems that the students balk at the notion of power:

Perhaps the person has an idea that you have the power and that they don't, so it's important for the social worker to disprove that notion (interview).

And I think that it's also very important that you can be guiding but not deciding. Of course, there are some rules and stuff that have to be followed, we can't get around that, but it is also important that the person never feels that they are clients because I see that as negative. It's very important that they feel that they have a hold on their own lives and that they don't come and give that to me (the hold on their life) in the beginning, and then that's it. It's very important that you can work together without taking over (interview).

Power is in the hands of the law, of the municipality, the person applying for assistance but not in the hands of the social worker, it seems. The social worker has no real power to change anything. Asked by the interviewer, "but is not it the social worker who has the power?" the students are at first silent, then they laugh, and only then do they acknowledge: "in the end it is." "In the end" can be understood as if nothing else works. Seemingly, it is also only power when you have to follow the rules:

I also think that social workers shouldn't all the time be like, well, I have the power, so it doesn't matter what the person says, but of course, they have to work so that decisions can be made in the end but if you keep that in view all the time then I think it's the wrong way to go about the

conversation. But of course, there's some power, and we have to be careful not to abuse that, right? (interview).

There are always some rules that you have to follow. Some places it's just more square than other places (interview).

[The social worker] should be guiding but not deciding [and] the person receiving assistance must never feel like a client (interview).

Conclusion and thinking about the future

Social work education and social work have been very closely connected to the state from the beginning. Social workers have been largely employed in municipalities where they are considered public servants and representatives of executive state power.

However, this perspective is not reflected in the students' understanding, nor is it the prominent story of the textbooks of social work. The social work textbooks and the students emphasize the social worker as primarily a helper. The social worker should function by giving the person receiving assistance the ability to flourish on his or her own terms. However, part of this is also an expectation that persons want to become "normalized": That is that they will take responsibility to get control of their lives. Consequently, help is viewed as the exception rather than the norm. Power is considered in terms of direct use of force and something that you may have to resort to if the person is unwilling to take responsibility for doing what is considered best (by the social worker as part of the municipality). That is, if it is impossible to persuade the person receiving assistance to accept what is presented as best. Simultaneously, the students acknowledge that they are hired into a system and that this system is constricting for what kind of social work they can do. They consider this limiting but more or less outside their control. They assume that their practice will be limited by the organizational framework and by-laws prohibiting them from doing the kind of social work that they associate with being

a good professional social worker. The social work textbooks that foreground help, guidance, and treatment support this understanding.

With this understanding, the students are situated in a difficult position because what they consider professional social work is difficult to sustain in the municipality's framework with its organizational and bureaucratic understanding of professionalism. The kind of help they want to provide is not considered power, and they seem to overlook the disciplinary aspects of this help and the many ways help can also become powerful and regulating. Since they want to discipline the person back to a perceived, healthier normal, this is not considered problematic. In the end, this means that the social worker is never responsible for the decisions made. They make their decisions from a notion that it is what the person receiving assistance wants or should be wanting and can be made to want by 'cooperation, motivation, and involvement.' If this does not work, they will use power, but then it is a power instigated by law, the municipal framework, or the political discourse. This fact allows them to "hide behind" the law, political discourse, and/or institutional values, thus avoiding responding to their personal responsibility for their social work practice. This is further accentuated by the importance they place on separating their private selves from their professional selves.

Following Martha Fineman, we propose that an understanding of professionalism centered on a shared vulnerability of all embodied beings could lead to a more resilient concept of professionalism (Fineman, 2008, 2013 and 2017; Fineman & Gear, 2013; Gear 2013).

In such a perspective, both social workers and clients are embodied and embedded vulnerable human beings. An ideal of the professional social worker as disembodied, objective, autonomous, and distant obscures this shared vulnerability with a bureaucratic mask that compels social workers to disclaim personal responsibility as well as curb demands for change. This point also means acknowledging that it is not possible for social workers to guide, help, or treat clients to invulnerability and disembodied rational autonomy, nor can this be the goal

of social work. Rather, professional social work must be centered on resilience and work for “a political and economic system that reacts in a responsive and supportive way” to human beings' shared vulnerability (Fineman, 2017).

Teaching this kind of professionalism must involve getting law and social work into a conversation about professionalism and responsibility. Social work must come to terms with its own power. Law must acknowledge that decision-making does not occur in a human and political vacuum and cannot be made to do so by following rules. Social work education is part of the network of state institutions that can provide resilience. It seems like there is more work to do before we meet this obligation fully.

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