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Chapter 8

Research as an Element in Social Work's Ongoing Search for Identity

Walter Lorenz

Social work has always had an uneasy relationship with research. It is therefore to be welcomed that the various important issues involved have recently received so much attention, particularly in the UK, where during 1999–2000 the ESRC for the first time sponsored a series of seminars on *Theorising Social Work Research*. Undoubtedly, taking research findings and above all taking the debate about research methodology seriously contributes to the social status of the profession – an area of considerable uncertainty for British social work. Reviewing these developments in their wider social and political context reveals that the options being debated with regard to the research methodology most appropriate to social work do not just represent technical or instrumental possibilities for the achievement of given goals; rather, these controversies are closely linked to the issue of the identity of social work. Moreover, it is suggested here that these debates do not coincide accidentally but that there is in fact an intricate and historical connection between them. Thus an adequately comprehensive answer to the question of how to engage in social work research requires a clearer account and understanding of the formation of social work identities than has generally been evident.

The most striking feature of social work's current identity is the fragmentation of the profession and discipline, not just in an international context, where it presents a bewildering variety of professional titles and intellectual discourses, but also at national level, where in every country several professional profiles exist in parallel, sometimes contesting each other's territories. In the UK this relates not just to the still relatively recent split between social work and probation and to the older tensions in the relationship between social work and youth and community work, but above all to the dichotomy between social work and social care. The growing emphasis on care management in recent years has now begun to fragment the professional field further, and while the introduction of national Social Care Councils may formalise the relationship between the distinctive traditions concerned, it will do little to create a common sense of identity or to invigorate the intellectual dialogue amongst them. In fact, while creating a unified identity might be a justifiable interest for any profession in general terms, in the case of social work and social care this might run counter to the actual social mandate that this professional group has acquired and has striven to develop, which involves setting

the interests of service users above professional self-interests. Person-centred needs never correspond neatly to professional boundaries and the plurality of perspectives in the social professions can serve as a reminder of the creative, critical potential of inter-professional boundary disputes, as long as they are regarded as more than merely matters of power and group interests. It is precisely in order to unlock this potential that it is necessary to understand social work's inherent diversity and to identify common features across its different forms, which requires in turn a clear and careful historical and conceptual analysis.

For theoretical, but also for practical purposes it is important to understand this diversity as neither the product merely of the vagaries of historical and administrative forces impinging on the development of the social professions, nor as the differentiated, self-generated unfolding of principled intellectual positions. The diversity arises, fundamentally, from the tension between the necessity for the profession to engage with a given historical, social and political reality and its desire, also necessary for its survival as a recognisable profession, to distance itself from these structural contexts and to establish fields and methods of relatively autonomous thought and action to underline its mediating capacity. This tension, and the ensuing contradictions, closely reflects the profession's ambivalent position between 'the lifeworld' (the realm of society in which people take care of their own affairs, individually and collectively) and 'the system' (where organised control and steering mechanisms operate), to use the key terms of Habermas's analytical grid (Blindenbacher, 1999; Habermas, 1987), which will be discussed further below. The social professions came into existence, in their various forms and in different countries, during a very distinct historical period in the development of modern societies in which these domains – system and lifeworld – moved apart, and they still reflect that split in their actions and appearance. Therefore the tension, like the diversity presented within and amongst these professions, is not something that should or indeed could be resolved. Rather, the very possibility of a distinct kind of social action, and thereby the possibility of realising social work's social mandate, lies precisely in the ability to maintain, and to operate accountably within, this tension. Thus an answer to the vexing question about social work's contemporary identity depends not on the definitive resolution of the current controversy over research methods – which, as will be shown, is not a new phenomenon at all – but very much on establishing a connection between the epistemological questions of concern in social work and a wider theory of society. Social work research methodology must therefore never focus on epistemology in isolation, but always in the context of a theory of society.

Social work between system and lifeworld

This chapter will approach these matters via Habermas's particular way of analysing the development of modern societies, which as already mentioned uses the distinction between lifeworld and system. These concepts refer together to a given state of society; 'lifeworld' captures those aspects and processes in which people experience themselves as communicating actors capable of expressing

intentions and giving meaning to their world, whereas 'system' denotes what are in fact the structural consequences of those actions and which ensure the material reproduction of society via the media of power and money [eds: see also Lovelock and Powell, this volume]. Modern societies, according to Habermas, are characterised by increasing differentiations within and between those two domains which results in their 'uncoupling' and, on account of the sheer 'success' of rationality in the system, the gradual 'colonisation' of the lifeworld by the system. In more concrete terms, arguments embodying instrumental rationality and conducted with reference to money and power have come to dominate the welfare state project, at the expense of communicative processes.

It is important to recognise that the origins of social work lie in both 'domains' – system and lifeworld – (Rauschenbach, 1999). The emergence of social work received significant impetus from initiatives at the level of the lifeworld in as much as voluntary activities, of both the charitable middle-class as well as the self-help and solidarity-creating working-class type, reflected the prevalent diversity of values and aspirations for a 'better society'. At the same time the integrative requirements of industrialising societies outlined the contours of welfare systems not as philanthropy but as calculated and organised attempts at social control. Social work was allocated its place and function in relation to the system's need for setting firm boundaries and limits to destabilising forces. This increased the pressure on the emergent profession to become incorporated into public systems of social policy and national agendas of social and cultural integration.

Thus, and crucially, social work became an intermediary between lifeworld and system, sharing in the differentiation and specialisation of both but also developing its mediating functions in both directions. Contemporary tensions in social work represent 'professionally alienated, displaced social contradictions' and manifest themselves in various perceived dichotomies:

> social work as social commitment v. social work as a paid occupation, as resulting from the mandate given by clients v. the result of an organisational and societal mandate, as self-help v. help from the outside, as care v. control – all still echoing the old basic controversy: does social change reflect the actual lived interests of people or is it social reform in the interest of the stability of the system? (Marzahn, 1982, p. 20, trans. this author)

These contradictions also show up in some of the fundamental ambiguities which are evident in the area of research. For instance, when studies have recourse to notions of 'community building' or to 'female qualities of caring', and latterly also to the concept of 'empowerment', and when research methodologies favour 'emancipatory research', we sense at once the 'promise' of these reference points resonating from their lifeworld qualities and roots. However, closer inspection of their use in particular contexts reveals that each of these same ideas can also have implications with regard to social control and can be used instrumentally for such purposes (Humphries, 1997). Conversely, adhering to principles and criteria of objectivity and rationality, key instruments enabling the system to hold and legitimise power in modernity, has been at times a means by which social work

research, on behalf of the profession, can resist that colonisation and provide a critical counter-reference to a system that seeks to use the social professions merely for purposes of social control.

Given the intermediary function of social work already outlined, the wider significance of discourses on research methodology cannot be elaborated adequately without reference to the intersection of these two sets of dynamics. They play a role on the one hand in the epistemological ambiguity between what has been described classically as the alternatives of social work as art and as science, and on the other hand in the ambivalence between striving for the status of a full, autonomous profession and retaining the empowering elements of 'voluntarism' and the solidarity with service users which they can convey.

Some elements of these complex interconnections have become visible in recent and current debates on social work research methods in the UK. While the pragmatism which prevails in the approach both to research and to practice methods in Britain (Powell, 2002) has hindered full recognition of the issues that are at stake, the political implications of the polarisation affecting professional practice as well as approaches to research nevertheless become apparent. Broadly speaking the debate divides into two camps, although in characterising it in this way we should not overlook the interlinking complexity of interests referred to above, which is present within each of the positions and which therefore gives rise to further differentiations in terms both of the pragmatics of organisational policies and of the impact of poststructuralist critiques (Kazi, 2000; Shaw, 1999) [eds: see also Gould, this volume].

On the one hand there is renewed interest in and advocacy for the relevance to social work of research methods which take up the traditions of positivism and empiricism, with the promise of providing accuracy of measurements, reliability of results, and transparency of actions, and hence of enhancing the public accountability of the profession (Dillenburger, 1998; Macdonald, 1994; Reid, 1994). Social work has always been suspected of lacking an empirical base for its methods of intervention, particularly an empirical base that was not borrowed from studies conducted by other disciplines, and there is certainly good reason to suggest that the profession has a need to confront data about the outcomes of its interventions (Shaw, 1999).

On the other hand this positivist stance is being contested from a perspective on research in social work which emphasises the elaboration and evaluation of subjective meanings as the key to understanding social phenomena. These meanings remain hidden to quantitative enquiry on account of the 'detachment' required by that method; they can be captured best by qualitative approaches which aim at giving expression to the authentic voice of the 'research subject' (Ruckdeschel, 1985; Sherman and Reid, 1994; White, 1998). Among other things this approach inverts, or at least relativises, the relationship between 'experts' and 'people with mere experience', and thereby exposes and criticises the differentials in power involved (Beresford and Evans, 1999).

Categorising the parties to the ongoing debate about social work research in terms of such opposing methodological or philosophical positions is problematic, since the differences between the 'two sides' are far from simple and clear-cut.

Crucially, the discussion is overlaid with a host of agendas which have a direct bearing on the gravitational pull of the various options and which can prompt curious 'border crossings' between theoretical perspectives. Chief among those is the renewed focus on assuring the quality of services, which itself has both a professional and a political side. The political agenda, noticeable particularly in the UK but spreading also to other parts of Europe (Rauschenbach, 1999), is about a restructuring of social work in terms of management criteria which emphasise cost-effectiveness and thereby outcome orientation. In research terms this is reflected in a shift from a focus on issues of principle and problem causation towards studies of policy implementation and effectiveness (Fisher, 1999; Gibbs, 2001). The professional agenda amounts to an attempt to reconstitute the status and to that extent the autonomy of the social work profession under these changed policy conditions by seeking to develop 'evidence-based practice', which of course feeds directly back into the same political agenda (see Webb (2001) for an incisive analysis consistent with the argument of the present chapter) [eds: see also Butler and Pugh, this volume; James, this volume; Jordan and Parton, this volume]. This concern emphasises reliance on research findings rather than on established intervention methods as the constitutive part of professional social work (Taylor and White, 2001). It implies that once a secure knowledge base has been established with regard to a given situation, intervention becomes a matter of following given procedures (and thereby avoiding 'mistakes'). Achieving and maintaining service quality, in this version, seeks to combine a basically empiricist research framework with the underlying concern of 'quality assurance' for consumer views and participation. This approach purports to subvert the dichotomies of positivism and phenomenology, quantitative and qualitative methods, and adjustment (control) and emancipation which had beset the agenda, thereby seducing an insecure profession with the promise of bringing it intellectually into the fold of postmodernism while providing certain assurances against the angst of total relativism. In this line of development, not only is British pragmatism showing itself at its acrobatic best (Trinder, 1996), it also, by claiming to have resolved the various tensions referred to, marks a surrender to the logic (and the power) of the system, with action reduced to procedures.

It is not surprising, therefore, that intellectual discontent over such an alluring but flawed settlement is manifesting itself. The question is how to mobilise resistance and counter-arguments effectively against a development that takes colonisation to new heights. In the UK the concept of 'realism' (Kazi, 1998; Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Taylor and White, 2001) is being suggested as a reference point for a possible settlement of the at times strongly conflicting interests, and as a means of giving the social work profession a unifying profile and more secure social status while retaining the lifeworld link in the form of an action perspective. In 'realistic evaluation', 'Practitioners construct models of their practice, which include their theoretical orientation, practice wisdom, accepted knowledge amongst peers, tacit knowledge and previous experience of what works, for whom and in what contexts' (Kazi, 2000, p. 764). The process continues through the participative testing of the hypotheses thus derived to lead to a context-specific intervention programme that 'harnesses enabling mechanisms and steers

clear of disabling mechanisms' (*ibid.*, pp. 764–5). The resultant models of 'scientific realism' (Kazi, 2000), 'sturdy relativism'/'realistic realism' (Taylor and White, 2001), or 'practice-focused reflexivity' (Sheppard, 1998), appear to satisfy the societal demands for greater accountability, the political interests in efficiency and effectiveness, and the professional concerns for autonomy based on scientific stringency.

However, there is a sense of premature settlement about these 'solutions', foreclosing on discussion, with a new emphasis on inclusiveness (empirical practice, interpretivist, and pragmatic approaches all under the roof of this type of 'realism') before the depth of the conflicts and the implications of social work's inherent diversity and plurality have been fully explored. Their concern with integration (of science and art, of rationality and emotions, of knowledge and values, of quantitative and qualitative models of research, of objectivity and subjectivity, of professional and consumer interests, of political agendas of control and of empowerment) paradoxically confirms their rootedness in and continued adherence to a dualistic epistemology disconnected from a theory of society. 'Realism' as the reliance on an objectivity which, though hidden and unreachable, serves as a given yardstick, surrenders the understanding of social processes to a scientific project which, by its very success in the area of science and technology, blocks the elaboration of values and meanings constitutive of societies and thereby the communicative potential constitutive of social work.

An alternative approach is explicitly to explore social work's intermediary role between lifeworld and system as this impacts in the area of research. This leads first of all to a sharper realisation of the conflicts and contradictions involved. But staying with this aspect of diversity, and acknowledging the apparent impossibility of uniting models of research and models of social work under one common approach, prompts the recognition that social work has its place in both lifeworld and system, and thereby releases its communicative potential. For Habermas the heuristic distinction between lifeworld and system marks two related realms of action in society, communicative and instrumental action, reflecting the sharp philosophical distinction he makes between communicative and instrumental reason (Habermas, 1987). The system is guided by principles and criteria of efficiency, necessary for the structural integration and material reproduction of society, by impersonal mechanisms best exemplified by the workings of the market. Communicative action, however, cannot come about on the basis of such 'given' reference points of meaning and understanding, but strives instead to constitute, out of the infinite diversity of subjective and conflicting meanings, the conditions for consensus. The openness of this process, its precarious ability to invoke reflection and critique, are for Habermas the very conditions – the only conditions – under which communication in its full sense can come about (Habermas, 1990).

Habermas emphasises the importance of the distinction between instrumental and communicative reason and action not only for the epistemological process of establishing different forms and regimes of knowing as such, but also for the creation of identities (Habermas, 1972). He elaborates on C.S. Peirce's observations that the (individual) human self which derives its identity solely from

the success or failure of instrumental action can only develop in a negative way. It learns to become aware of itself only in moments where the discrepancy between its own position and the given, generalised consensus of 'common sense wisdom' becomes apparent. This observation could also be extended to the constitution of social work's professional identity, albeit that due care must be taken not to exaggerate the homogeneity of the latter. Once social work surrenders to the rationalistic requirements of the system and therefore adopts the dogma of positivism, it becomes set on an instrumental perspective on action and its identity becomes negatively constituted in terms of the 'remaining' discrepancy between claims (to efficiency and effectiveness) and resultant achievements. Since this discrepancy will always remain considerable, such negative constitution of the identity of social work is also likely to result in a negative public image.

These consequences cannot be avoided by means of the recourse to 'client participation' in research, at least not as long as such participation is conceived or employed purely as an instrumental device to give the results greater validity. Used in this way it simply preserves and transfers the basic underlying conception of research as instrumental action to an expanded 'community of researchers and practitioners'. Even though the results of such research can render themselves less vulnerable to criticism, seeming to satisfy both methodological and ideological criteria of 'representation' and 'representativeness' to a greater extent than does research conducted 'on them', the views of users, however representative they might be in statistical terms, are always going to be partial and in many ways 'parochial'. From an instrumental perspective on research the greater 'fit' of needs and outcomes achieved through client participation might represent a quantitative gain, but already in the application of such results the negative effects become tangible in as much as the approach renders those users who do not 'fit' into the framework totally defenceless and without representation, their right to subjectivity and to having a public voice having been further eroded.

This strongly suggests an ongoing need for social work research to be conceptualised and realised as communicative action, and hence the need to develop fully a hermeneutic approach in a research context. This is not to juxtapose a superior research *method* to the ones touched on so far, but rather to establish some *meta-theoretical criteria* which could guide the search for appropriate methods that might have to differ from situation to situation but which can be evaluated against criteria established by means of consensus-oriented communication. The existence of a diversity of possible methods necessitates communication; the imposition of one dogma – which essentially *is* positivism (Habermas, 1972) – but equally the 'anything goes' indifference to relativity which poses as postmodern (Fook, 2002) forecloses communication and thus understanding. It might therefore be less important to see social work as either a science or an art and to endorse the choice with the promotion of the corresponding research methods, than to recognise more fully the historical nature of social work in relation to the differentiation of modern societies.

Historical reflections

Reflection on key moments in the development of the social professions might illustrate the usefulness of the perspective just intimated. A defining moment for the emergence of a distinct social work identity in the UK was the divergence between the 'case-by-case' approach, pioneered by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) at the end of the nineteenth century, and the 'sociological' (structural) approach promoted during the same period by the Fabian Society. This controversy was not just about practice methodology, nor was it a clear-cut ideological conflict; rather it can also be regarded as paradigmatic as regards the different epistemologies of either side and as such it is an important indication of the early differentiation of research methods in this discipline in relation to lifeworld and system.

The individualism of the COS approach reflected a moral commitment to the transmission of values through direct interaction with the poor and destitute; the moral principles were applied not purely in a dogmatic, 'top-down' way, but through the 'study' of individual life circumstances. 'Investigation' became a characteristic key method of the Society, with which it sought to justify the shift from 'spontaneous' and indiscriminate (and thereby in its view socially and morally deleterious) almsgiving, to rational, evidence-based intervention, which it sought to promote as its contribution to the improvement of social conditions. Social enquiry at the individual level became at once both a research and an intervention method for the COS worker; in Octavia Hill's famous definition, given in an address to the Social Science Association in 1869: 'By knowledge of character more is meant than whether a man is a drunkard or a woman dishonest, it means knowledge of the passions, hopes and history of the people ... how to move, touch, teach them' (Hill, 1869, quoted in Woodroofe, 1962, p. 52). The gathering of copious case notes by the charity workers (Bosanquet, 1914) reflected a mode of research that sought to engage and to understand from 'within' the life context of the clients and hence 'the lifeworld', no matter how much the actual evaluation and the resulting decisions were overlaid with the requirements of 'the system' in the form of given economic and political norms. The Society's own struggle to resolve the ensuing contradictions with reference to philanthropy as 'scientific charity' show the mediating function which social work, even in this early pre-professional form, had taken on. It placed itself between the requirements of a lifeworld, in which countless interests and value positions sought to articulate themselves and to maintain the viability of family and community life in the face of urbanisation and industrialisation, and the impersonal integrative requirements of national political and economic systems.

The agenda of the Fabian Society started from the system end of the spectrum, with the aim of achieving stability and integration through structural reforms. Scientific enquiry, inspired by positivism and a firm belief in the impact of social data obtained through painstaking social research, as undertaken by Booth and Rowntree, formed its natural basis, although actual reforms by no means followed 'automatically' on the back of convincing data but rather had to be campaigned for. The agents of Fabianism therefore had to engage with the lifeworld very directly if

they were to bring about changes, and this, despite their opposing positions on the 1905 Royal Commission on the Reform of the Poor Law (Woodroofe, 1962), provided an eventual meeting ground between COS and Fabians in the form of joint training courses for social workers at the London School of Economics.

Another instance of these unfolding dynamics is the wide acclaim and positive reception attracted by the earliest 'social work textbook', Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* (1917). This can be attributed to the resonance the book had for early social workers finding themselves in the mediating role suggested above but without recourse to a systematic method. It is significant that this text elevates 'research' to a central position in *intervention*, thereby revealing both the pioneering potential and the limitations of the work. With this textbook casework became a defining method of social work rather than being simply a description of its way of operating. Casework could lay claim to being a scientific method on account of the positivism in which it is ultimately rooted and which it seeks to share with the great model profession of medicine, where diagnosis based on scientific principles formed the proof of a decisive turn away from quackery. The limitations of Mary Richmond's approach lay in the epistemological emptiness of her concept of diagnosis, which purported to be a gathering of 'facts' but which failed to problematise the relationship between fact and evaluation. As Annette Garrett wrote, recalling her own mistaken beliefs derived from training at that time: 'If we could just have enough facts we would know what to do' (Garrett, 1949, p. 222). By trying to resolve the tension between demands on the part of both the lifeworld and the system, of which practitioners like Richmond were so acutely aware, the casework approach deprived itself of its actual communicative potential; but it did render the profession socially acceptable.

Alice Salomon, the pioneer of German social work and social work education, articulated the same dilemmas and under the very title borrowed from Mary Richmond's work. Her book *Soziale Diagnose* (Salomon, 1926), for which she also considered the title *Soziale Recherche*, reflects on the epistemological problems facing social work(ers) and suggests a combination of inductive and deductive approaches to the acquisition of knowledge, both in individual cases and as the research basis for specific intervention methods in general. In her account she clearly struggles between holding on to the respectability which a scientific approach can convey and doing justice to the hermeneutic processes which practice experience suggests: 'The data collected have different meanings. The essential aspect is the correct evaluation of these details, their comparison, their interpretation' (Salomon, 1926, p. 7). Elsewhere Alice Salomon resorts to appeals to 'motherliness' as a key ingredient of social work epistemology, and for her this is not a biological reference point but rather indicates the level at which the experience of caring can be universalised, such that her overall conception contains a very distinctive vision of a classless society (Salomon, 1919). Here the need for an integration of research and practice, of methodological and political concerns, for an objectivity that does not silence the voice of subjectivity, especially of women, finds an appealing though 'old-fashioned' expression. What is lacking is not only, as Salomon herself acknowledges, the contribution of an appropriate psychology that elaborates on the helping process as a process of (self-)discovery

(for both client and helper), but also an explicit epistemology which does not devalue as 'unscientific' the intermediary stance such approaches try to maintain.

The eventually almost universal acceptance which Freudian psychology achieved in social work served exactly the purpose of gaining respectability through the adoption of a seemingly positivist method, almost obliterating thereby the element of hermeneutic reflexivity contained in Freud's original approach. Freud's achievement, as Habermas emphasises in his historical review of social epistemology, was to elevate the process of self-reflection to the level of a properly scientific undertaking and thereby to expand the scope and method of hermeneutics significantly (Habermas, 1972). The logic of the seemingly illogical sphere of the unconscious reveals itself not through a standardised, objectivised code of symbols applied by an all-knowing expert who penetrates those barriers (even though this misrepresentation has often been attributed to Freud); on the contrary the 'truth' of the unconscious reveals itself only through acts of self-reflection which the therapist is merely instrumental in bringing about. This defines the mediating role of the therapist in very stringent terms. It gives each therapeutic encounter the character of a discovery, of research; not, however, research conducted *on* a patient, but the self-searching work *of* the patient herself.

Applied to casework the psychoanalytic method has the potential both to satisfy the requirements of the system within which social service work takes place and which aims ultimately at producing adjustment to the 'inevitable' in the form of social norms, and at the same time to engage with and support the communicative abilities of individuals in their lifeworld which aim at being better understood – by others and by themselves. The original sense of the much maligned term 'working through' expresses this dual aspect of the encounter between client and social worker; a complex process in which social workers are, on account of their societal position and mandate, always already engaged by necessity, but for which they had so far lacked a comprehensive heuristic tool that could capture this complexity without reducing it to a mechanistic, instrumental activity.

The Freudian mode of enquiry was by no means immune against reductionist interpretations and uses, and had a similar impact on parts of the intellectual tradition of 'applied social science', prevalent mostly in Anglo-Saxon countries, as it had on that of social pedagogy, which prevailed in most continental European countries (Lorenz, 2000; 2001). When the interests of the respective social professions in status and public recognition link with the societal process of rationalisation and bureaucratisation they tend to promote practice and research models geared towards objectivity, value neutrality and effectiveness. From the 'applied social science' perspective Freudian concepts supplemented the tools available for 'manipulating the environment' with tools that remedied individual pathology rationally and effectively (Garrett, 1949). Paradoxically, this concern with making comprehensive objective assessments generated very little in the way of primary research, a requirement which greater public acceptance of the approach had to some extent obviated. Commenting on the expansion of casework services in the US in the 1920s and 1930s, Leiby observes: 'It is curious that the demand for these services expanded steadily, despite the fact that their practitioners were never able to offer either a very cogent argument or impressive efficacy for their practice' (Leiby, 1969, p. 314). The answer to this puzzle doubtless lay in the social acceptance of the methods themselves and of their proponents who had found a place in society.

Social pedagogy; the hermeneutic tradition and its betrayal

While the effect of the incorporation of social pedagogy into the growing welfare bureaucracy of the Weimar Republic was very similar in terms of the instrumental use of new psychological insights such as those presented by psychoanalysis, there were differences in the way this academic tradition raised issues concerning the relationship between lifeworld and system. Pedagogy, in contrast to social science grounded in positivism, was initially not so much an academic discipline as representative of a social and intellectual movement – to which, to some extent, the unified German nation of the late nineteenth century owed its existence, or at least its identity. Both Romantic and Liberal movements went beyond simply exposing the deficits and dangers of modern society, proposing and articulating cultural alternatives to the growing fragmentation and alienation of the population and calling for cultural renewal and opportunities for self-improvement. Particularly in the form of social pedagogy, an alternative approach to education as such was set out, rather than just a supplementary structure of education outside the school system. Rather than beginning with the requirements of the political system for having a well-adjusted population, the starting point was the potential of each individual, which required fostering towards a sense of community. The defining form of enquiry of this 'reform movement' became hermeneutics, elaborated above all in the work of Dilthey, who by contrasting the epistemologies of the physical or natural sciences and the 'human sciences' (*Geisteswissenschaften* – usually, and unsatisfactorily, rendered as 'arts' or 'humanities' in the British context) addressed very specifically the needs of pedagogy for a reliable basis of knowing. The question was whether the practice of social pedagogy, in seeking to find a place within the overall (largely authoritarian) educational and social policies of the state, would be able to apply this methodology for the purposes of both primary research and the search for hermeneutic forms of intervention.

This project was realised to some extent in the Weimar Republic when social pedagogues developed their own research approaches to the study of youth in direct contrast to the prevailing methods in the positivistically orientated social sciences. Qualitative methods, such as diaries and accounts of their daily lives given by young people themselves, came to play an important role (Böhnisch *et al.*, 1997), not just in understanding the pressures and dilemmas these youngsters were facing but also in constructing methods of engaging them that started from those very experiences. The influence of Freudian concepts on this type of research was considerable, particularly in the area of residential child care, where child-oriented approaches were being promoted and old regimes changed drastically. It is noteworthy that psychoanalytic concepts in the version promoted by Alfred Adler inspired numerous pedagogical grassroots movements in German-speaking

countries and also in the USA, and these often combined with socialist political movements which criticised and opposed the authoritarianism that prevailed in public child and youth services (Schille, 1997).

Overall, the 1920s in Austria and Germany were marked by sharply contrasting 'social experiments', on the Right as well as on the Left of the political spectrum. The progressive reform projects foundered, however, partly on the ideological controversies in which they became embroiled, and partly due simply to their lack of financial resources. Conceptually, the pedagogical reform movement hypothesised that starting with the subjective notions and wishes of young people would not heighten their alienation from society nor increase the latter's fragmentation, but rather that this type of socialisation would eventually realise a more solid sense of community and social integration. The evidence in terms of the outcomes of these practice methods did not tend to support this claim, as many youngsters were simply too disruptive in groups and communities to endorse the ideal of such integration. The (perverse) realisation of the project of establishing a correspondence between the spontaneous unfolding of the enthusiastic social commitment of youth and a wider, national community providing a 'home' for youthful ideals was engineered by the welfare politics of Hitler's fascism, whose youth policies incorporated those very ideas. It institutionalised an ideology-based populist sense of belonging, declaring this to be the realisation of the wishes of the youth movement, albeit – and this was regarded as the price to be paid – through the exclusion and, sometimes quite literal elimination of those individuals who did not fit the concept. The imposition of a totalitarian system along these lines disarmed or silenced many formerly critical pedagogues and 'validated' the role of those who were willing to provide fitting epistemologies, of whatever intellectual kind – and/or quality.

Nazi welfare concepts replaced the emergent welfare consensus pertaining to the integrative responsibilities of the state, based on political negotiations and professional as well as intellectual controversies, with a 'given' criterion of belonging: the racist concept of an organic body of the 'folk'. This ideology changed the epistemology of social service staff (in both public and non-governmental agencies) decisively. There was no longer any ground for the understanding of subjectivity and the negotiation of shared goals; their task became solely the application of objectivised criteria of social pathology, which were to be used for the purposes of the 'selection' of those whose attitude and physique qualified them as belonging to the national community, and the exclusion, incarceration, 'treatment' (including sterilisation) and eventual murder of those who did not belong (Sünker and Otto, 1997). Nazi welfare represents the triumph of instrumental rationality, a system that purports to represent the lifeworld whilst actually swallowing it up, thus leaving social work no scope for mediation, only for detached, mechanical diagnosis.

The link between social work's attraction to positivist epistemologies and its receptiveness to fascist ideology, or indeed the more general link between epistemology, methodology and the functional requirements of political systems, was not recognised – or at least not reflected upon – in the period of reconstruction and anti-fascist re-education following the Second World War. UN- and US-led training programmes emphasised the objectivity which casework methods introduced into the assessment and intervention process as an antidote to the apparent receptiveness of pedagogy to ideological interference (Lorenz, 1994). The approach was infused with an ethos which C. Wright Mills identified as prevailing in sociological research and which he called 'the professional ideology of social pathologists' (Mills, 1943): 'The ideal of practicality, of not being "utopian", operated in conjunction with other factors as a polemic against the "philosophy of history", brought into American sociology by men trained in Germany' (*ibid.*, p. 168). The 'thinking in situations unrelated to structures' fitted, for Mills (*ibid.*, p. 170), into a social work epistemology that was still shaped by Richmond's *Social Diagnosis*; the goals of adjustment to a given normative reality were presupposed uncritically.

In terms of social work's identity, the first two decades after the Second World War were a time when a unified, universal model of social work seemed achievable, based on the assumption, expressed in terms of ethical principles, that people had basically the same needs everywhere, regardless of culture and social and political context. Parsonian functionalist sociology, which prevailed not only in the US but also in large parts of Europe, provided the backdrop (and an explanation) for the way in which the social professions effected their task and status arrangements with the welfare states in whose rapid rise they played an increasingly central role. Universality and identity seemed to be secured even before the claims made to them had been empirically endorsed. This provided renewed evidence that once the link between social work's interest in being fully recognised as a profession and society's need for social work as a factor contributing to social stability and integration has been established, pragmatic/functionalist interests in research and methodology will tend to outweigh those aimed at communicative differentiation of and engagement with lifeworld processes.

Where unease about the nature and function of research in social work emerged at all, it was explored from the perspective of whether social work needed its own approach to research or whether it should 'borrow' prevailing models from the social sciences. The 'traditional' instrument of research in social work had been the evaluation of case records, undertaken with a view to understanding the complexity of practice situations and thence improving intervention accordingly (Lyons, 2000; Walton, 1975). But increasingly this was seen as less respectable than the large-scale quantitative research approach which represented the contemporary social science standard but which could not at that time be replicated with the resources available to social work. Heineman observed of the establishment of this hierarchical ranking order between models of research, based on experimental designs and geared towards prediction and *ex post facto* evaluative studies:

> The problem is not that these assumptions about what constitutes good science and hence good social work research never lead to useful knowledge, but, rather, that they are used normatively, rather than descriptively, to prescribe some research methodologies and proscribe others. (Heineman, 1981, p. 374)

Research and the question of identity

One much-noted exception to conventional preferences, an example of qualitative research that received wide acclaim, was the study by Mayer and Timms (1970), *The Client Speaks*, although the self-critical implications of this research were seen immediately as handing arguments to a political lobby in Britain critical of social work's growing professional autonomy. The trend towards the dominance of positivist research standards was only halted, and that only temporarily perhaps, with the advent of new social movements in the 1970s and 1980s; these posed a profound challenge to the unifying and consolidating trend in the formation of social work's identity – a challenge encompassing but reaching beyond research methodology. Once the possibility of a plurality of fundamentally contrasting approaches to social work has been conceived, as demonstrated for instance by the emergence of feminist social work, and in its wake by the renewed interest in and valuing of personal experience over formal qualifications and expertise, the profession's position in society becomes insecure and contested. But precisely in this uncertainty, new stances on research can also form, leading in turn to a further differentiation of models of practice and a widening of the boundaries of social work overall.

In this situation a starker polarisation has set in between universalism and positivism-inspired empiricism on the one hand and a newly self-confident subjectivism and constructivism on the other. 'Experience' has come to be taken seriously again as a subject of and as a vehicle for welfare research, particularly in studies inspired by feminist ideas, which simultaneously challenge the alleged neutrality of conventional approaches. Hanmer and Hearn argue that 'Because gender-absence and gender-neutrality in social science is impossible to obtain, presentations in these traditions do not eliminate power relations between women and men, but rather only serve to obscure them' (1999, p. 107). Other social movements, notably those of black people, people with disability, psychiatric illness, social care users and trauma survivors, have added their voice to the critique of 'top-down research' and struggle to reclaim the right to authentic representation in research (Beresford and Evans, 1999).

With these challenges questions of identity have moved centre stage once more, not just in terms of the identities of service users, but also those of service providers, both individually and collectively. For the movements promoting emancipatory, user-led research have had a very distinct agenda of challenging the power of established professions, seeing this as maintained not least by means of 'authoritative' research. Here the interplay between intellectual, professional and political factors has come into play once again, for the shift in emphasis and orientation has really only become effective on the back of social policy changes aimed at altering fundamentally the role and structure of public social services (Gibbs, 2001).

It appears at first a curious and dangerous coincidence for social work that the issues of 'de-constructing' its power and structure are forced onto the agenda as it were from both directions, from neo-liberal policies and from user movements, and this makes it very difficult for social work to respond. The discipline and

profession may well have considerable sympathy with the 'emancipatory' approach to research as it concurs with some of its own central values, but such sympathy is going to be short-lived if it results in the gradual abolition of social work's recognised place in society. However, once this conflict is seen in the light of social work's position straddling system and lifeworld, new, less defensive responses become possible, not least in terms of research strategies.

Similar problems and possibilities may pertain with regard to social work facing the dilemmas attendant upon the fundamental philosophical challenges posed to all 'truth claims' by poststructuralist and postmodern positions, which compound the uncertainty already long experienced by social work over its approach to research. Their programme has been to lay bare the power structures contained in all regimes of truth and has resulted in the destabilisation and decentring of all positions previously held to be authoritative. Identities can therefore no longer be taken as simply given, but only as constructed and transient. It must be stressed that this sobering realisation not only suspends the authority of empirical studies but also relativises the seeming authenticity of subjective accounts.

Seen from the historical perspective sketched above, the sharp divisions over the function of research and the choice of research methods apparent in social work today are not new phenomena [eds: see also Gould, this volume]. However, they present themselves currently with unprecedented force, and this indicates not simply that social work *per se* is in a confused state but that the rupture between system and lifeworld and the processes of differentiation within each of those domains have become more acute. Social work is unavoidably caught up in these tensions and finds its role and identity threatened by the bewildering plurality of demands and of reference points in the associated debates. What seems to be more important than making decisions on whether to pursue this or that research methodology is to relate the discourse on research back to more fundamental reflections on the place and role of social work in society. Noting the plurality of forms of social work can serve as a heuristic device to provide a better understanding of the dilemmas it faces. On the one hand there are many parallel ways of interpreting social work's role on account of the nature of the discipline and profession in its historical context, and this means its dual mandate between system and lifeworld. On the other hand this perspective also provides a basic understanding for the shared themes connecting those different manifestations.

In its link to lifeworld processes, their often contradictory effects on both epistemology and practice notwithstanding, social work keeps open its potential for communicative action, action that engages with conflicting norms, wishes and aspirations in such a way that it creates the conditions for reaching a consensus (Lorenz, 2001). Social work research can ultimately only make sense as research that is congruent with the profession's social mandate, and this means that it needs to develop as communicative action, in Habermas's sense. The many attempts at framing social work research as a reflexive process which are currently under debate are hopeful signs in this direction. However, this discussion needs to be linked to a critical theory of society in order to prevent its function and its results from becoming absorbed into the system, with its pursuit of instrumental action,

and thereby risking the unintended consequence of contributing to tighter and more powerful social control. As Habermas put it some years ago:

> ... an exclusively technical civilization, which is devoid of the interconnection between theory and praxis ... is threatened by the splitting of its consciousness, and by the splitting of human beings into two classes – the social engineers and the inmates of closed institutions. (Habermas, 1974, p. 282)

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Chapter 9

'Knowing How to Go On': Towards Situated Practice and Emergent Theory in Social Work

Jeremy Kearney

> Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through '*experience*'.—Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*.—This is what 'learning' and 'teaching' are like here.—What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating-rules.
>
> What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words.
>
> (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 227, emphases in original)

One of the key themes in this book is the complex relationship between research, theory and practice in social work, and in this chapter I want to consider this issue from a perspective which draws on the later work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly his notion of 'language-games', and also on social constructionist thinking. In the approach which I propose, research and theory are regarded as being neither in opposition to practice nor foundational to it, but rather as weaving into and emerging out of forms of situated practice experience. In such particular situations the issue is not only – or not so much – the application of the right rule or procedure, as being able to answer the question 'how should I act in this specific context?'

Wittgenstein described our everyday ability to understand the meanings of words and to use them correctly in context as 'knowing how to go on' (1953, para. 154), seeing this as involving a relational–responsive approach in which we act not only out of our own experiences and ideas but also respond in a moral way to the actions of others. In similar vein, John Shotter describes such practices as a 'social poetics', succeeding not in the sense applicable to theories worked out beforehand, but in terms of 'certain practical uses of language, at crucial points within the ongoing conduct of practice, by those involved in it' (Shotter and Katz, 1996, p.