Reflecting on a Common Core and the Variability of Social Work Definitions

Discussed in Terms of Foucault's "Theme and its Interpretations"

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Abstract: The assumed impossibility of forming a widely accepted view of social work is explained on the one hand by the contesting nature of social work definitions, and on the other by a loss of professional identity since the 1960s. The aim of the article is to elaborate a third explanation based on the hypothesis that social workers adhere to their differing interpretations of common social work themes. Foucault's idea of a "thematic realm which reveals a set of possible interpretations" represents the viewpoint from which the argument of the article is designed. To reach the aim, we address the question of why Bartlett, who explicitly adheres to an individual view of a common social work theme, emphasizes her specific interpretation of what she identifies as the social work focus. By generalizing the answer to this question, a hypothesis on the motives for defining social work in terms of individual views of a common social work theme is developed. It is argued that the lack of a widely accepted view of social work is a consequence of social work being defined by individual social workers based on ideas that are beyond their immediate conscious control. Suggestions are made on how to educate social workers to reflect on their unexamined motives for adhering to dissimilar interpretations of social work common themes.

Cree (2003, p. 3) asserts that *"it is almost impossible to find a simple definition of social work with which everyone is likely to agree"*, because *"social work has to be seen as a*

collection of competing and contradictory discourses" (Cree, 2003, p. 4). We conclude based on the above quoted arguments that Cree assumes that the variability of social work definitions makes it impossible to agree on a common social work definition. Based on the all-embracing international literature survey, Asquith, Clark, Waterhouse (2005) seem to present this assumption as a well-grounded truth. In writing this article, we argue that even the unavoidable variability of competing and contradictory social work notions does not necessary imply the impossibility of a social work definition or core on which many can agree.

In social work thinking, we have found two explanations for the variability of social work definitions.

First, it is argued that social work is *"contested"*. At any place and point in time, there are processes of legitimation through which the interchanges between stakeholders validate which definition is seen legitimate from a variety of social work definitions. The validity of any given definition of social work is bound up in the existing social relationships and structures that shape stakeholder interchanges (Askeland, Payne, 2001; Asquith, Clark, Waterhouse, 2005). Because stakeholder interchange always varies in terms of time, place, and social configuration, the same is true for the definitions of social work. Finding the common core of how social workers self-refer is impossible, and the definition of social work remains up for discussion or bargaining.

The second explanation presents that – even when the contested nature of social work is taken into account – social developments since the 1960s have resulted in a loss of professional identity. Postmodern casting of doubt on the social work domain, which was more clearly conceptualized in the past (Howe, 1994; Lorenz, 2007 etc.), as well as the managerialism and de-professionalization of the mission of social work (Clark, Newman, 1997; Laan v. d., 1998; Harris, 2003; Dustin, 2007 etc.) are considered in these terms. When a

clear delimitation of the profession's core is lacking, social workers' identification wi their profession weakens and social workers turn more frequently to variable definitions of social work when they refer to themselves. Finding the definition of social work with which everyone is likely to agree seems impossible in terms of the second explanation.

Both of these explanations seem to follow the assumption that the variability of social work definitions is inescapable, which implies the impossibility of a widely accepted social work definition. However, does the variability of social work definitions imply the impossibility of such a definition?

Foucault (1989) proposes that a theme to which different individuals pay attention represents the realm that reveals a set of different, even conflicting interpretations. Following this proposition, we suppose it is possible to define social work in terms of its general thematic core, even if different interpretations of this core imply variable sets of more, or less contradictory social work definitions.

However, regardless of whether a general thematic core definition seems possible, the question of how social workers perceive these general definitions remains. Following Lorenz (2007) as well as our personal experience, we believe that social workers perceive general definitions of social work to be less apt than their individual experience. Hence, they adhere to their individual and differing notions of what social work is. We propose this is the "third" reason for the lack of a broadly agreed-upon definition of social work.

However, this explanation has a serious gap. We do not know why social workers perceive general thematic core definitions to be less apt or why they adhere to their individual interpretations of what is common in these individual views of social work. To answer these questions we devote our attention to Bartlett's book, The Common Base of Social Work Practice (1970). Bartlett seems to be a clear example of a writer who both aspires to define the social work general thematic core and adheres to her individual notion of what social work is.

Hence, we expect to grasp the perspective of distinct representative adherence to individual social work notions by analysing Bartlett's aforementioned text. We can identify her authentic reasons to define the general social work core in terms of her individual notion of what social work is. Following this, we examine the nature of Bartlett's reasons for doing this, and propose a more general hypothesis on the roots of adherence to individual social work notions. Moreover, we have chance to do the analysis by examining scholarly structured and argued text.

In order to analyse the roots of adherence to the personal, individual and differing social work notions we propose to start with two premises. First, it is possible to distinguish between the thematic core of social work definitions and dissimilar interpretations of it. The second premise argues that social workers often do not distinguish between the abovementioned thematic core and the dissimilar interpretations they are familiar with. Their specific interpretations often concern some kind of social work common topic or core. Even so, social workers are blind to this core of their profession because they adhere to their individual and divergent views of a common topic when they define social work. They identify themselves as actors of their differing and irreconcilable understandings rather than looking for features that intersect these different notions of social work. If this is true, finding a simple definition of social work with which everyone is likely to agree seems impossible.

Accepting this impossibility seems risky. Solidarity and trust among social workers vanish if adherence to individual and divergent views of a common topic predominates. Currently, social workers mostly perform their jobs in the context of multidisciplinary helping nets or case nets (Payne, 2006; Musil, 2013). Lacking mutual solidarity and trust, they are less able to support each other in negotiating and advocating social work roles and contributions with physicians, lawyers, psychologists, mediators, teachers, policemen, municipal politicians, clerical workers etc. with whom social workers interact when they help their clients.

Moreover, in underestimating a common core, social workers are more susceptible to accepting roles defined by those who do not understand or who are not amenable to the types of help that social workers provide. If so, specific social work ways of helping are less available to those under stress. This seems relevant especially when social workers individually negotiate their roles and contributions in interdisciplinary helping networks, without the support of any public authority or influential professional association.

Supposing this, investigating two aspects of defining social work seems relevant: conceptualizing the relation between the common core and individual views of social work, and examining reasons for social workers' adherence to their individual views of social work common topics.

The aim of the article, its structure and methodology

As stated above, we argue that our "third" explanation suffers a gap. This gap consists in the lack of understanding why social workers adhere to their individual interpretations of what is common in their individual views of social work. The aim of this article is to fill this gap by developing a hypothesis concerning the reasons why social workers prefer their individual views of social work common topics to those common topics themselves when they define social work.

To develop this hypothesis, we analyse Bartlett's (1970) concept of social work focus from the perspective of Foucault (1989). He argues that a common theme, rather than creating a unified view, inherently inspires differing interpretations of it. Bartlett (1970) identifies what is common in social work definitions, on the one hand, however she believes that it is adequate to promote a specific interpretation of the common topic so that it can become the focus of the social work profession, on the other hand. Comparing Foucault's and Bartlett's views, one can say that Bartlett is an involved social worker who adheres to her individual

interpretation of what she identifies as the social work common topic. Doing this, she exemplifies those social workers who perceive defining social work in terms of its general thematic core to be less apt than their personal experience and opinion indicates. Hence, we put the following question: "Why does Bartlett emphasize her specific interpretation of what she identifies as the social work common topic when she defines social work focus?" By generalizing the answer to this question, we develop a hypothesis on the motives to define social work in terms of individual views of social work common topics.

Bartlett (1970) presents a definition of the social work common core, but she reassesses and rejects this core and instead proposes a specific interpretation of this core to serve as a social work focus. Hence, we answer the question concerning Bartlett's reasons for preferring an individualized interpretation of the common topic by analysing her statements on social work focus as outlined in her monograph "The common base of social work practice" (Bartlett, 1970).

To answer why Bartlett prefers specific interpretations of the social work common topic we proceed as follows. First, we present Foucault's understanding of a common theme, which he considers a frame for differing interpretations. We argue that the concept of the interrelationship between the thematic core and its interpretations is both relevant and well substantiated by documented evidence. Next, we outline our findings from the analysis of Bartlett's statements on social work focus and clarify her motives for following a specific view of the social work common topic in defining the focus of the profession. Based on these findings we propose a hypothesis on social workers' reasons for defining social work through their individual and dissimilar views of the common topic. Finally, we recommend educating social workers so that they understand that their individual perceptions of the common core of social work are not as far removed from the common core as is usually portrayed.

"Theme" – a common realm for its differing interpretations

Foucault doubted historians who searched for *"uninterrupted unities"* of monolithic periods of thought (Foucault, 1989, p. 5–6). This doubt led to his search for understanding the interrelations between the thematic core and its interpretations. Based on his findings in psychology, medicine, mathematics, economy, biology etc., Foucault (1989) proposes: When different individuals pay attention to a similar theme, their interpretations or understandings of this theme will vary. A theme represents a kind of unity which consists in the *"space"* (p. 36) which opens a limited set of different possibilities to transform respective themes using different sets of concepts (Foucault, 1989). Hence, a theme is the realm, which reveals a set of possible choices. The scale of these choices is limited by the theme itself according to Foucault (1989). The choice of theme gives the respective individual power to speak inside its realm in the eyes of those who follow the same theme. One's statements are considered true until the respective individual obeys this theme (Foucault, 1980).

When interpreted from the perspective of investigating the interrelation between respective common core and its dissimilar interpretations, one can reiterate Foucault's argument in the following manner: Those who share similar assumptions concerning what a relevant theme is for them do not understand their theme unequivocally. They construct more possibilities to interpret this theme without dismissing it. To apply a different interpretation of a given theme does not preclude adherence to the same theme. Just the opposite is true: a common theme anticipates the possible choices of the differing interpretations assigned to it. A theme represents a domain of possible and different views of it.

If so, those social workers who assume that doing social work consists in paying attention to the same theme (e.g. "helping those under stress to deal with society around them") do understand their common theme in different manners. For example, some of them understand helping to deal with society as "promoting the ability of their clients to meet what society

demands of them". Others suppose that helping with the surrounding society consists in "changing what society demands of their clients". This does not preclude that both groups of social workers follow the same theme.

It is worth adding that it is possible that followers of different views are not fully aware that they pursue a common theme, e.g. they are social workers whose theme is helping people to deal with the society around them. However, they leave out this fact, because they adhere to their specific view of "their" common theme. Some of them emphasize the ability to meet what society demands, whereas others prefer changing such demands. Overwhelmed by their dissimilar understandings of helping clients to deal with societal demands, both groups neglect their commonalities and are not aware of their common theme. Thus, they may be prone to becoming mutually distrusting or even conflicting groups of social workers.

Setting out a comprehensive focus and proposing a narrow definition

Bartlett (1970) supposes that only when social workers consider social work in terms of its overall practice does it truly become a "profession". Bartlett (1970, p. 17, 86) applies the term *"focus"* and refers to a distinctive theme which defines a *"peculiar area"* or *"particular phenomena"* of central concern with which social work deals. She believes that sharing a focus is the most crucial feature of thinking about social work in terms of its overall practice. If such a theme is not clear, distinctive and particular enough, it should be identified and accepted by social workers so that social work becomes a genuine profession (Bartlett, 1970). Hence, by proposing a peculiar area of social work central concern, Bartlett assumes a kind of thematic core in how social workers think about their profession.

According to Bartlett (1970, p. 17), social work focus consists of two elements. These are the abovementioned peculiar area of social work concern and *"concepts for organizing thinking regarding this area"*. Like Foucault, Bartlett assumes differences in thinking on the

social work thematic core when she discusses ways to organizing thinking about it. However, unlike Foucault, she does not accept divergent concepts of a theme as inherent variability inside a realm delineated by such a theme. She assumes these differences upset the process of building the social work profession and she aspires to bridge them. To overcome these upsetting differences she tries to define social work focus in a way that is *"comprehensive enough"* to integrate different ways of overall thinking about the social work focus or theme (Bartlett, 1970, p. 16–17, 103).

When we look at her way of building such a comprehensive social work theme in more detail, we see that Bartlett (1970) defines social work focus by deducing it from social work literature, mainly by G. Hamilton, W. E. Gordon, E. Studt, P. R. Silverman, M. A. Cannon and others. This stresses the concept of "situation", understood in terms of the interrelation or interaction between the "psycho or personal", on the one hand, and "social or environment", on the other hand. Referring to arguments in this literature, she identifies the peculiar phenomena of social work as *"the interaction of people and environment"* (Bartlett, 1970, p. 100). Bartlett (1970, p. 104) explains that this concept focuses on *"exchanges between"* people and their environment. She expresses the phenomena of central social work concern by the following schema (Bartlett, 1970, p. 100):

"People   ↔   Interaction   ↔   Environment"
(Henceforth "P-I-E".)

Next Bartlett (1970, p. 101–102) argues: *"...to be more suitable for social work, the concept may be elaborated and expressed thus:*

"People ↔ Exchange ↔ Environmental

Coping Balance Demands"

(Henceforth "PC-EB-ED".)

The reasons for interpreting "P-I-E" this way seem to a great extent to be implicit. We are able identify two of these reasons by reading the text analysed. First, Bartlett follows the assumed general structure of focus (see above). Second, Bartlett tries to specify the peculiar phenomena social work deals with so that it better fits her notions of social work goals.

Bartlett does not state the first abovementioned reason explicitly. Even so, is seems to be clear. Bartlett (1970) assumes that focus consists of the two elements mentioned above – the "distinct area the profession deals with" and "concepts for organizing thinking regarding such phenomena". Hence, one can suppose that Bartlett takes the step to develop the second element by expressing the concept of "P-I-E" in a manner "more suitable for social work" (see above).

The second aforementioned reason concerns matching the core concept to the social work goal. Bartlett (1970, p. 101) argues that the first version of "P-I-E" is defined *"at the most abstract level"* and *"is too impersonal"*. She suggests that making the second version of social work focus less abstract, less impersonal and more suitable helps social workers *"to accomplish their goal"*.

Bartlett (1970, p. 100–101) argues that replacing the idea of "P-I-E" with the concept of "PC-EB-ED" helps to accomplish this because *"social workers must understand the meaning of the situations to the people involved in them"*. (She refers to coping with the pressures of environmental demands as a "situation".) Social workers must understand this because the ultimate social work goal is *"the growth of the individual"* through striving *"to improve balance between the coping efforts and the environmental demands"* (Bartlett, 1970, p. 103).

Bartlett (1970) supposes that understanding the meaning of coping efforts and environmental demands by people who strive to cope with environmental pressures is a precondition of giving them relevant feedback. Moreover, giving such feedback is a precondition of discovering and using new resources and potential to improve the exchange balance between people coping and environmental demands, which, as mentioned above, is social work's ultimate goal.

Looking at Bartlett's reasoning in this way, one can detect the following three-link argument chain. The first link consists in declaration of the ultimate social work goal; this involves improving the exchange balance between people coping with the environment and the environmental demands, i.e. in improving "PC-EB-ED" (Bartlett, 1970). The second link consists of justifying the replacement of "P-I-E" with "PC-EB-ED"; this is because this replacement helps to understand how people perceive their own efforts in coping with environmental demands (Bartlett, 1970). The third link explains that understanding people's views of their own coping efforts implies giving them relevant feedback. This is a precondition for improving "PC-EB-ED" and accomplishing social work's ultimate goal (Bartlett, 1970).

When one follows the abovementioned sequence of arguments, the only reason for substituting "P-I-E" with "PC-EB-ED" seems to be Bartlett's declaration that social work's ultimate goal consists in improving "PC-EB-ED". However, Bartlett does not explicitly delineate the sequence we introduce by the previous paragraph. The distribution of the three chain-links mentioned above is as follows in the text by Bartlett: The second link comes first (p. 100-101), the first link in the middle (p. 103), and the third link at the end (p. 104). Explicit justification for replacing "P-I-E" with "PC-EB-ED" is found on pages 100 and 101. Here Bartlett explains the relevance of "PC-EB-ED" by the need to understand people's views of their own situation. The next two links in the aforementioned sequence explain that Bartlett

perceives understanding people's views of their own situation as a precondition of improving "PC-EB-ED". Hence, "PC-EB-ED" is substantiated by the need to understand people's views of their situations (p. 100–100), whereas this understanding is assumed a precondition of improving "PC-EB-ED" (p. 103–104). The chain is a circle. However, this circle is not visible because the first link and the other two links are presented in different parts of the text. Just the presence of "PC-EB-ED" in all three statements insinuates that there is an interrelation between the arguments on pages 100–101 and pages 103–104.

Thus, Bartlett replaces "P-I-E" with "PC-EB-ED" because she believes "PC-EB-ED" will facilitate meeting social work's ultimate goal. So what does this indicate in terms of the interrelation between theme and its dissimilar interpretations or, using Bartlett's terminology, in terms of the interrelation between a particular area of social work concern and dissimilar concepts for organizing thinking regarding this area?

First, Bartlett equates the "particular area of social work concern" with "just one specific concept for organizing thinking about this area". Second, by doing this Bartlett replaces the abstract theme with its specific interpretation. She substitutes defining a peculiar area of social work concern with the quite abstract idea of "P-I-E", which seems interpretable from dissimilar social work viewpoints, with just one specific interpretation of this abstract idea. Third, by replacing the abstract definition of area of social work concern with just one specific interpretation of it, Bartlett excludes the other existing as well as possible future dissimilar interpretations of "Person–Interaction–Environment", labelling them "unsuitable" for social work.

What are her motives in doing this? Writing about her intentions, Bartlett (1970, p. 10–18) assumes that *"continuity and convergence of ideas"* is a standard and desired feature of any established profession, a precondition of its members *"confidence"*, a profession's *"strength"*, and of its proper functioning in society. Assuming this, Bartlett warns social

workers: *"With the current emphasis on modifying social conditions ... there is ... a tendency to reject social work's earlier concern with individuals and small groups as inadequate."* Hence, at the time of Bartlett's writing, social work was fragmented by the two views of its practice – the *"person"* based view, and the *"environment"* based view. *"Such differences ... lead to ... separation between two views"* and undermine the unity and strength of the profession (Bartlett, 1970, p. 14–15, 103).

Bartlett promotes overcoming this fragmentation by bringing the *"person"* based and the "environment" based views of social work practice together. Her declared intention is to make connections between them, so that it is possible to view them in relation to each other. This is the reason Bartlett devotes her attention to the idea of social work focus and tries to define it in a way that is *"comprehensive enough"* to integrate the idea of the person and the idea of environment (Bartlett, 1970, p. 16, 103).

Comparing this intention with Bartlett's view of social work focus points out the collision between the two. Being interpretable both in "person" as well as in "environment" terms, the abstract idea of "P-I-E" ("Person–Interaction–Environment") seems comprehensible. Hence, it seems open to the adherence of "person" as well as "environment" attuned social workers. However, Bartlett replaces the abstract "P-I-E" formula with its "PC-EB-ED" ("People Coping–Exchange Balance–Environmental Demands") interpretation that refers to the "person based" goals of promoting people's potential to conform to environmental demands. The primary reference to "person based" goals seems true. Even Bartlett (1970) suggests accomplishing the ultimate social work goal by acting upon the personal as well as the environmental side of the interaction.

With the emphasis on conforming the person to environmental demands, radical environmentalists are no longer able to adhere to Bartlett's "PC-EB-ED" understanding of social work focus. Around 1960 in America, the separation in social work crystallized mainly

between those case social workers who preferred to adjust clients to the moral standards of the community and those who identified themselves as *"radicals"* at that time, and who preferred to repudiate established standards of behaviour (Rein, 1976, p. 468). However, radical proponents of "environment based" approaches seem excluded from social work by the focus accentuating clients' conforming to environmental demands.

As stated above, Bartlett adheres to values of convergence and aspires to find a comprehensive social work focus. If so, why does she replace the abstract concept of "P-I-E", which is acceptable to dissimilar social work viewpoints, with its "person based" interpretation that seeks to promote conformity to environmental demands? Why does she discourage proponents of those *"social work ideologies"* who want *"to repudiate established standards of behaviour"* (Rein, 1976, p. 468) from adhering to her definition of social work focus? Analysing the above-quoted text by Bartlett, we have found the reason in her assumption of *"society's needs"*. Following this assumption, Bartlett conceives the purpose for identifying social work focus as follows: *"... to produce leaders and practitioners competent to make the needed contribution to society"*, i.e. to contribute to fulfilling society's needs (Bartlett, 1970, p. 14, 16, 18).

The assumption of "society's needs" seems to be analogous to Parsons' idea of the functional prerequisites (or imperatives) of a social system. These specific functions are the requirements that any social system (or society) needs to satisfy in order to survive and remain stable. Parsons understood the social system as a structure of roles organized by normed expectations and maintained by sanctions. These roles, normed expectations, and sanctions govern interactions among individuals and produce standards which, when internalized by individual personalities, become dispositions to act in favour of satisfying system functions (Parsons, 1985; Harrington, 2005).

These notions of social system (or society) were published and became popular in the 1950s in America. Hence, there is no reason to doubt that Bartlett was familiar with, if not inspired by the abovementioned notion of social system needs when she developed the idea of environmental demands to which social work clients should be helped to conform. This supposition is supported by the fact that Bartlett (1970, p. 103–104) explains that the idea of balance between environmental demands and people's coping efforts is related to concepts of social system theory, namely *"homeostasis"* and *"feedback"*. To substantiate the application of social system theories in social work, she refers to texts by Hearn (1958, 1969).

Bartlett's definition of both social work focus and ultimate goal is grounded in the above-quoted idea of promoting individual growth so that his or her coping efforts and the environmental demands are better balanced. We found that the concept of environmental demands is seen to be paramount in the context of this idea. According to Bartlett, balancing between people coping and environmental demands means promoting individual growth and capacity to cope with these demands. In examining the roots of this idea, we suppose that Bartlett understands "environmental demands" in Parsons-related terms.

If so, Bartlett uses the term "environmental demands" to refer to the normed expectations maintained by sanctions so that individuals act in favour of satisfying system needs. Conforming to these kind of demands means promoting stability and preventing the breakdown of societal functioning as a whole. Bartlett (1970, p. 93–106) then uses the term*"social functioning"* to describe the balance between people's coping efforts and the environmental demands.

To sum up, Bartlett replaces the abstract concept of "P-I-E" with its less comprehensive "PC-EB-ED" interpretation stressing clients' conformity to environmental demands. In doing so, she pushes out radical approaches because they focus on repudiating established standards of behaviour. Following this intention, radicals do not accept the conformity-seeking view of

social work laid out by Bartlett. She equates social work focus and the specific and less comprehensive "PC-EB-ED" interpretation of the abstract "P-I-E". The reason seems to lie in her Parsons-related assumption that environmental demands are paramount to people's coping capacities and actions. This assumption follows Bartlett's presumption that environmental demands are expressions of and legitimized by the necessity to satisfy the social system functional needs mentioned above.

Grounding the definition of social work focus on these Parsons-related assumptions seems to contradict Bartlett's intention to integrate different streams with her definition of social work focus. Bartlett claims to find a focus comprehensive enough to integrate different views of social work. However, the result of her search is a narrowly defined focus which in fact excludes some interpretations of the core theme of "P-I-E".

Based on these findings we may now go on to answer the question: "Why does Bartlett emphasize her specific interpretation of what she identifies as the social work common topic when she defines social work focus?" We suppose that the reason for the contradiction between setting out a comprehensive and integrating focus and the resulting exclusive focus definition by Bartlett is because part of her motives were out of her control. Bartlett expresses her desire for convergence inside the profession and at the same time she adheres to the idea of social system needs. She follows this idea when construing the paramount status of meeting environmental demands without expressing or commenting on it in any way. Put another way, Bartlett follows the idea of social system needs without commenting on them explicitly. This seems to indicate that Bartlett does not take into account that the idea of social system needs underlies her "PC-EB-ED" formula. This formula includes the assumption that social workers should help people to accommodate their personal capacities so that they are able to conform to the environmental demands they are confronted with. The view that people's personal capacities are to be adapted to environmental demands seems analogous to Parson's

supposition that the structure of social action follows the structure of social system needs (see above).

Motives that are out of control

We conclude that Bartlett prefers her "People Coping–Exchange Balance–Environmental Demands" formula, which seems to be a specific interpretation of the more comprehensive "Person– Interaction–Environment", because part of her motives were out of her control. By generalizing this conclusion, we develop a hypothesis on the motives to define social work in terms of individual views of social work common topics. We propose this hypothesis to answer to the question: Why do social workers perceive general thematic core definitions to be less apt and why do they adhere to their individual interpretations of what is common in their individual views of social work?

We ask above why Bartlett's rather narrow definition of social work focus comes into conflict with her intention to set up a comprehensive and integrating focus. We conclude that her defined and intended focus come into conflict because Bartlett does not consider her definition of focus to rely upon the idea of social system needs. We suppose that this lack of reflection on the influence of a specific idea is a typical example of how social workers construe and define social worker when they adhere to a specific interpretation of the social work theme. We propose the ensuing hypothetical construction of the third explanation by generalizing this typical example to portray how social workers seek a definition of social work with which they identify:

The impossibility of a widely accepted definition of social work seems to be implied by social workers' inclination to adhere to their specific and dissimilar views of the possible social work general theme without examining or accepting this theme. Social workers often find concepts defining the social work general theme as too abstract and removed from the

social work definitions they are familiar with. They often do not perceive expressions of the social work general theme in terms of the Foucault-related idea of a thematic realm, which reveals a set of possible interpretations. If this is so, social workers do not assume that their individual social work definitions may be partial interpretations of the common theme. Hence, they do not pay attention to what is common in their individual views of social work. This neglect of the idea of the social work thematic realm seems to follow from the personal motives or ideas social workers hold and yet do not reflect on when they construe their definitions of social work. In these terms, the impossibility of a widely accepted view of social work seems to imply that the way social workers construe their definitions of social work is influenced by ideas, which are beyond their immediate conscious control.

Hence, we conclude based on our analysis of Bartlett's discourse that the lesson of our investigation is following: Social workers do adhere to their individual social work notions and they are blind to the common themes embraced in these differing notions when they conform to ideas that are beyond their immediate conscious control. We recommend keeping this in mind when addressing social workers' abilities to see common themes in their differing and individual ways of experiencing what social work is for them.

Keeping an individual notion while assuming a common frame

If reasonable, the explanation for the lack of a widely agreed upon social work definition, which is based on the idea of framing different interpretations with an abstract theme, leads to a clear recommendation for educating social workers. In terms of this explanation, there are two suppositions to be followed. The first concerns the supposed lack of reflection. The second one considers the supposed lack of knowledge of the idea of a "thematic realm which reveals a set of possible interpretations" by Foucault.

Supposing that social work students and practitioners do not reflect on reasons for their tendency to overlook the abstract common themes, it is recommended that they should practice reflecting on their individual ideas and motives for adhering to specific interpretations of common social work concerns. Students can write on and discuss the questions: "Why do I think that social work has a different or similar mission, core task or theme than others (students, colleagues, teachers, authors etc.) consider relevant?" "What are the ideas or values driving me to believe that social work is something similar to or different from what others believe?" Preferably, students should write on and discus the questions: "Is my explanation valid, i.e. do those ideas and values that have influenced my ideas until now explain why I adhere to my view of social work?" "When defining social work, do I follow some other ideas I did not take into account before?"

In answering these questions, students and practitioners may find that their ideational motives differ from or are analogous to other understandings of social work. However, reaching this point does not mean that an individual social worker will accept the idea of a common theme or frame relating to different views of social work. It also may not mean he or she will find the idea of a common frame acceptable.

Supposing a lack of knowledge of the concept of Foucault's "thematic realm", it is recommended that students become familiar with this concept through lectures, reading, writing, and discussing thematic frames that include the possibilities and limits of differing interpretations of a common theme. By doing this, students become aware of the distinction between an abstract theme and its interpretations in conceptual terms. Preferably, examples of this distinction from social work literature (see Bartlett above), as well as from field practice, would help social workers to recognize that their personal ideas about social work bear elements of common social work themes. If the distinction between the abstract theme and its interpretation becomes perceptible, the advantages and disadvantages of recognizing specific

and common ideas brought by students' personal notions of social work can be discussed. Cognitive schemes concerning any anticipated assets and risks of distinguishing between a theme and its interpretations can be developed individually.

We believe that becoming aware of the idea of the "thematic realm which reveals a set of possible interpretations" and reflecting on ideas that promote or break individual adherence to the idea of common themes framing are ways to maintain individual notions while assuming a common frame. Discussing the idea of thematic frame and reflecting on the relations between individual notions and their thematic frames can make the seeing and feeling boundary lines between specific social work notions and the common matters that intersect these notions less strong.

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