

# **A cultural approach to social work studies**

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*Kulturanalytisk tilnærming i sosialt arbeid*

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**Education for care and help in a multicultural society**

More than ever social workers have to face people from cultures other than their own. How can this professional group best meet the multicultural reality of today's society? It is in the social work study programs that the basis is laid for good cultural understanding in social work practice. It is also there that the basis is laid for social workers to orientate their work towards cultural processes that are relevant to the welfare situation of people. The students need during their study to learn what is culture and how they, as representatives of the public welfare system, are cultural practitioners. They have to develop theoretical perspectives that include how they, as well as every single client or bureaucrat or politician or others, think and act in the light of cultural meaning.

Culture develops from different activities and experiences. In anthropology one definition of culture is "a system of knowledge, ideas, values, rules, lying behind what we do and is expressed through what we do" (Keesing 1981:68) Culture is expressed in the processes where human actions take place. The multicultural society is therefore not only an ethnic plurality consisting of indigenous people and immigrants. Culture differences comprise also differences between genders, between power groups and between generations. They comprise differences between cultures of professions and disciplines, regional cultural features, city cultures and farming or fishery cultures, or reindeer herding cultures (Høgmo 1986, Henriksen 1999). Each one of us is a carrier of cultural values through which we understand ourselves. Potentials for change are closely tied to how both helpers and help seekers learn to interpret the existing possibilities and what can be done by people themselves. The training colleges are responsible for educating skilled helpers to meet those who seek help. It is important to have highly skilled social workers because social problems are very complex. The helper will touch personal tragedies and often take decisions with long reach. This demands a basic knowledge with culturally analytical skills regarding society and individuals. But teaching programs can often seem split up and incoherent. Theoretically, social work is constructed across different disciplines. In exercise, at best, it is a practical public caring profession with a high degree of reflection and critical thinking in working with interpersonal relationships.

While craft subjects in their practice have working equipment as tools in their professional exercise, it is communication that is the tool in work with relationships. All the theoretical matters in education ought to be related to the professional exercise. At the same time it has to be quality secured by scientifically recognised assessments and the teaching staff must be skilled by formal criteria of competence. In education the theoretical foundation for professional practical competence is learned by both oral and written practice and it also has to contain training in executing practical actions. A consistent theoretical perspective can be difficult to work in to subject- and teaching plans. Social work, being focused on action, is mirrored most clearly in the part of teaching called "skill training" and of course in the practical periods of the education (Nyhus 2001). But much of the other components in this interdisciplinary teaching program can point in other directions.

In this article I want to reflect on how culturally analytical thinking can become a thorough approach in social work education. A possible way is to emphasise how culture is expressed and interpreted in social work practice. The article is about three ways education can prepare social workers to understand women and men, including themselves, as interpreters and also creators of culture. I will first (1) try to outline briefly two theoretical lines in the understanding of science that focus on interpreting significations; hermeneutics and phenomenology, both

giving experiences and activities an important place in human life. Further on I will (2) show a perspective on communication dealing with the use of signs to interpret and create meaning. Finally I will (3) introduce the concept reflexivity suggesting that the social worker and the client through their interpretations of signifying signs are constructors of reality in this field of work. To emphasise the relevance of the theoretical way of thinking argued above, I am going to discuss similarities between a hermeneutic and a social work approach to phenomena in human life. This I will do by comparing aspects of qualitative research methods and processes in social work. I will point out similarities between the relation helper-help seeker and the relation researcher-informant. Both can be regarded, in principle, as relations between Self and the Other (Mead 1934).

## **Hermeneutics and phenomenology – useful theory lines**

It is a constantly recurring task in social work education to unite theory and practice, in a way that makes them appear to be interwoven areas of knowledge, not as different worlds. Reducing the demand that practical competence of the social worker shall be firmly based in theory, is in my opinion a dead end. Theories and reality are two aspects of the same thing. It is about making theoretical knowledge useful in practical work and vice versa, to conceptualise theoretically what you experience in practice. Teaching at the university college level should be founded on research. This makes it necessary to discuss how knowledge is built up by research. Similarities between research and practical social work are important to bring out in order to create a relevant theoretical unity in the study. Professionally interesting approaches to the relation between human beings in society and culture, exist in both phenomenological and hermeneutical theory lines. Let us look at their usefulness in social work.

Hermeneutics was originally a theological discipline used in the interpretation of texts from the bible, that means it was used for the interpretation of written meaning. Later on it became a method in the human sciences, above all in philology opposing the positivist methods in the natural sciences. Interpretation of texts can differ considerably from the positivist experimenting with measurable unities and causal connections. The modern hermeneutics was founded by Wilhelm Dilthey, and consisted of studying especially the historical and social connections as the background of the text in question (Aadland 1997). It was to be a “methodology of understanding”. When anthropologists started to use the concept ‘text’ it was in their studies of human behaviour and action as cultural phenomena. This implied that a social scientific discipline started to use the reading of texts as a metaphor to what takes place when we interpret cultural phenomena. It implies to approach cultural phenomena by “reading” or interpreting culture through significant behaviour or signs being expressed in interaction and communication, in material structure and in organisational and institutional arrangements.<sup>1</sup> An important difference between philology and social sciences appears here. As social scientists confronted with the field of study we do not relate to an object of research, the written text. Instead we stand in front of and participate ourselves in human relations between subjects who think, mean and want something. Both are trying to understand. Both are understanding and interpreting subjects.

Important premises for the modern hermeneutics were laid by Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology (Aadland 1997). The phenomenology is well fitted for understanding some of what happens in the relation between helper and help-seeker as well as in the relation between researcher and informant. But it is important to point at the difference, in the fact that the social worker is in the role of a helper, which the researcher is not. However, here I will be less concerned about what differs, than about what unify the social worker and the researcher. In phenomenological theory the consciousness is turned towards phenomena in the world as they appear to us.

<sup>1</sup> *In the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics a sign can be whatever unity, a word, gesture, image, dressing style – as far as it has meaning for somebody (Plantinga 1997).*

We have no access to things and surroundings like they are “in their own”. On the contrary we have to relate to things as they are perceived by us. The consciousness adds something to what we presume exists, a supplement to what we see. In the same way that we presume the house we see has a back, we make assumptions about the past of a human being – a past that has made the foundation of the meanings this person expresses for us today. The researcher or the helper can be understood as the I-consciousness who sees and interprets the phenomenon. By reflecting on the phenomena we meet, we may obtain deeper understanding. What we are going to interpret is the life-world of the other person. By the concept ‘life-world’ Husserl means “the totality of all our additions and supplements in our understanding of the world” (Aadland 1997). It is important that the other gets an opportunity to appear as unbiased and unconditional as possible, and in her/his own premises, not as a category the helper knows from the specialist literature – an incest victim, a failure in school, a drug addict. The client (user) is a concrete person in her/his own life-world, and has her/his own experience of betrayal and loss, disappointments and despair – or mastering and pleasure. The interpreter must try to be conscious about and avoid her/his own preparatory interpretations. I as an interpreter, relate to the Other through empathy, which is opening me up to the experience of the Other. A concrete relation is established between the interpretive Self and the interpreted Other. In this perspective the development of knowledge is tied to a social relation where also emotional processes take place. The dialogue in the relation is of great importance for understanding and action. It is in the dialogue we discover and create each other.

The hermeneutics and the phenomenology are basic views in theories of science, which harmonise with the practical reality of social work. They are the starting point for an interpretive approach to social processes based on getting close to people in their daily lives, to understand their life-worlds. It concerns understanding people from their positions and their own experiences in ordinary life, instead of trying to force peoples daily life in to the abstract concepts of scientific theories.

## **Critical voices**

The culture perspective and the interpretative approach have not been dominating in social work theory tradition. On the contrary, criticism can be raised against social work for an instrumental use of ready-made working methods and standardised helping measures not taking into account cultural differences and specific needs. From anthropological point of view positioned in qualitative methodology, Marianne Gullestad has raised criticism against a part of the theoretical basis of social work. She has pointed out that the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the client and society can be overlooked in the analysis, if theory and methodology are not clearly participant orientated (Gullestad 1994). Her argument is that it is necessary, in an investigation, to be aware that the clients are active people making their own choices. In her theoretical understanding of social life it is necessary to focus on what people do, their activities and tasks, to be able to analyse what significations people include in their actions, and how they understand their world. Instead of pushing the empirical diversity of the world into rigid patterns that can be deduced from established theories, it is necessary to study the life of people from where they stand and from their perspective. That means one has to do fieldwork where people live, to be able to see what interconnections and processes they take part in. Fieldwork implies the researcher participates in activities, observes actions and has conversations about actual themes. Interviews can also be used to deepen the understanding of motivation underpinning actions. The concept of knowledge in social work is, in her opinion, more dominated by definitions of concepts than of analyses of social phenomena as culture-related events and situations. Within this theoretical tradition, research may be characterised by conclusions of statistical and objective patterns of different categories of client groups. In her opinion research ought to be concerned with developing an understanding of the processes of how superior structures are about to develop in society, and how they influence different client groups. Research has to take into account that there has

been a lack of culturally analytical understanding in social work.

It is interesting how Gullestad connects her criticism to qualitative research methods and fieldwork taking place over a longer period with repetitive meetings between researcher and informant. Only like this a precise conceptual understanding can develop which has its starting point in the interpretations held by people themselves.<sup>2</sup> Using a traditional research interview the researcher meets the informant only once. The material the researcher is left with, after such an interview, is the ideology of the informant, not the real conditions for actions that appear in practice. In this theoretical tradition the researcher emphasises more on distance than on relation and confidence. Gullestad asks whether this mirrors the anxiety of the social workers that they are not being professional, an anxiety that results in less humanity and more alienation than is appropriate.

Also from the theory field of social work itself, critical reflections have surfaced, arguing for an interpretive, understanding comprehension of knowledge. According to Synnöve Karvinen (1998) such a practice-orientated approach has existed in periods of historical development of social work. But in the struggle for a trustworthy scientific reputation and status as a profession, the social workers have been led away from the participant-focused point of view and towards emphasising demands for professional working methods. Karvinen points out that the theory tradition in this professional field often is perceived as uninteresting, or understood as given, and a professional ideal of excellence. There has been very little agreement between theory tradition and practical social work.

According to these two critics, the lack of cultural perspective with its qualitative methodology has taken social work away from the client as an active agent. As a result of this, research and understanding are developed with reference to the social worker world of colleagues, institutions, working methods and client groups, more than to the special person seeking help. This has consequences for the helping measures taken. Theoretical presuppositions can be dominating in the reflections of the social worker and tied to the well-known list of possible interventions. This can lead to paternalistic interpretations from the social worker, and a more or less conscious acceptance on the client's part. Without a strong knowledge of the art of interpreting on the part of the social worker, the descriptions given by the client about her/his life can be coloured by the context best known to the social worker.

## **A 'gendered' culture context**

To exemplify that culture concerns more than what we call un-known immigrant cultures or indigenous group cultures, I will point at how every one of us is a carrier of culture, interpreter of culture and creator of culture in our daily life, where what we do presupposes us to increase and develop necessary knowledge. Also as creators of knowledge we are women and men with identities built on background, surroundings, language, experiences. All these factors are culturally formed and have become a ballast of knowledge about what is my life and my possibilities, an informal knowledge about my context. By context I mean the connections I am a part of, the surroundings of phenomena, the conditions influencing my actions, the social and material frames around my assessments and choices. Also the formal knowledge administered in research and education systems is contextual. It is produced by subjects about subjects in their world. Similarly the concrete social work is contextual. Both helper and help-seeker are human beings with senses and feelings, influenced by their backgrounds, their surroundings, their culture and their language and none the less by their gender. The relational work must build on a contextual understanding and has to take care of the help-seeking person as part of a social context, where understanding is built through interaction and experiences.

<sup>2</sup> *Of course this does not mean an underestimation of generalisable knowledge and empirical documented categories.*

In this way interacting women and men are creating their worlds inside contextual frames. It is important to be conscious about differences in gender related ways of thinking, expressing meaning, preferences of values and patterns of reactions. These are as important in social work as are ethnic culture differences. A humane understanding of self and surroundings is a gendered understanding (Holter 1996). The gendered understanding is integrated in other cultural phenomena, for example those coming from ethnic background. Ethnic specific symbols or signs often differ between women and men. Gender should be a natural part of the culture perspective in education of social workers. It should never be an additional theme varying by the subject interests of individual teachers or employers. It can easily become a marginal item, disappearing amongst more important subjects.

If gender is a theme excluded from the curricula of social work study programs, it can be a problem for several reasons. Firstly, women form the majority among students. Secondly, we know that men often avoid the helping system, in spite of the fact that the problems of women and children often are tied to actions and behaviour of men. At the same time it is men who are the greater part of the client group connected to cultures of alcohol, drugs and violence. How can the help be satisfactory if the helper is ignorant about the gender specific ways of expressing the dynamics and power plays between women and men?

Society has changed. It is important to be aware of how the values and actions of women and men are different in today's cultures and societies to what they were a generation ago and how different parts of the world develop at different speeds. But a general experience is that many problems of clients have their origin in the gender relation, in parents' marriage or the client's own partnership, in gender encounters of youths, in identity development and varying gender conflicts. An example is the over-frequency of suicides among homosexuals. Another example is the problem faced by young immigrant women concerning forced marriage and circumcision (gender mutilation). Also in same gender relations, destructive processes can be related to a certain gender culture (Fangen 1998, Hearn 1998). It can be gangs of youths comparing and distancing themselves from other groups, or processes where individuals have to defend their honour. There is no doubt that gender is a very important cultural factor in the context of problems faced by the social work system.

The context of social work is also the local society's culture surrounding the relation between helper and help-seeker, a social system formed through generations and their activities in the social system. It comprises the life of every individual. It is part of the life-world of people. At the same time the context is the national culture and increasingly a global system of defined frames of bureaucratic arrangements, laws and institutionalised knowledge integrated in parts of the professional literature. Most of such arrangements are formed on the basis of male experiences and backgrounds. Differences in the historical paths of women and men are part of what has been governing the development of modernity (Giddens 1992), and these differences may be said to permeate the world we live in. Men had the power of definitions and the power of decisions in the public areas of culture, where the works of theories have been undertaken. Much invisible power lies in these frames of reference.

But much invisible power can also lie in private areas, where women have always had a cultural hegemony (Holtedahl 1986). I believe we today are struggling very much with interpreting signs connected to the world of experiences and universes of understanding, belonging to the opposite gender. It is not strange that in social work situations we can feel a great distance between the demands of the public system and the problems of the client.

### **Interpretation of signs in culture sensitive work**

Social work can utilise theoretical approaches emphasising what is going on in daily life communication where we express ourselves in many different ways, both verbally and non-

verbally. In the work it is important to be concerned with investigating thoroughly the problems expressed by the client. The professional attention must be directed towards all signs that can contribute to the interpretation of these problems, which again must be seen as part of the cultural context in which she or he is participating and gets her/his experiences.

Meeting the multicultural milieu demands competence in interpreting other signs than the linguistic signs of verbal language. Various forms of meaning can be expressed nonverbally through signs, consciously or unconsciously functioning as cultural markers and pointing reflexively to a more or less unknown life-world (Singer 1981). A young male client with Samii ethnic background might have an intonation in his language being a sign of ethnic belonging and that should be important for how the social worker communicates with the person concerning his life situation. Social work professionals in a cross-cultural context must be observant and sharp interpreters of signs (Høgmo 1998). Similarly they must be aware that the help-seeker also is an interpreter. A client with Samii background may feel resistance against cooperating with a social worker who, by various signs, demonstrates belonging to the culture where the client experiences discrimination. The signs through which the helper tells about her/his culture and class belonging, is part of what the help-seeker observes. The stranger is interpreted on the background of the life-world of the interpreter. A male social worker will have other qualifications for meeting the clients than a female social worker has.

Communication is as important in qualitative research methods as in the professional working methods. Whether we are researchers or helpers we use signs in communication. We receive signs through our senses, we use the intellect to interpret the signs of others, and we send out signs that are received and interpreted by others. As sensing individuals we are included in mediation processes where meaning is interpreted. With our use of signs we are between the empirical world and the understanding of it (Dines Johansen & Larsen 1994, Jenssen 2000) We are, so to say, positioned in a space between events and concepts. This is the case whether we are researchers or informants and it is the case whether we are the one giving help or the one seeking help.

As interpreters we create by our interpretations our own understanding of what we register by our senses. We construct our reality. The concept 'construction' is often used in new theories of the social sciences, but it does not always take care of the understanding of relations. Often the interpretations are done and formulated in language as if they describe a world without us. The co-production of signification made by the interpreter is often excluded from analyses. Constructivist approaches have grown from the acknowledgement that the world does not exist "out there", but comes into being by the description from researchers who participate themselves in the same world. The researcher is an actor in the development of knowledge. So is the social worker. In the same way that the social worker might be in danger of influencing the client in her/his understanding of her/his own life-world, on basis of the social worker's personal and professional conditions, a researcher may be getting the answers he or she is "asking for" by posing leading questions, formulated from her or his own context (Kvale 1997). In order to avoid such mistakes, it is crucially necessary to have a theoretical understanding of how construction of meaning is part of the conversation between participants also in the social services (Parton & Byrne 2000). It is a demanding balance between having respect for how the clients understand their problems and to contribute in developing their strengths and their ability to change the situation by themselves.

## **Reflexive research and social work**

As researchers we, so to say, construct what we claim to "find" by our methods and analyses (Steier 1991). In this way we may say also that the helper is constructing the client's world through the written descriptions, which are put in case files and passed on to the next helper. Through the use of words, the material and immaterial world is conceptualized and formulated as interpretations of what we experience. It is important that constructions are as much as

possible in accordance with reality and with the client's own constructions. There is a danger in over-interpreting what we want to understand, if we are not aware of our own culture's influence on the descriptions developing through this process. For example there exist a considerable amount of professional literature concerning how the helper may be guilty of clients transmitting memories they don't have.<sup>3</sup>

In social constructionism the concept 'reflexivity' is often used. The concept has its origin in the Latin word *reflexio/reflectere* (Stam 1992), meaning 'bend back to'. We know it from grammar; the reflexive verbs pointing back on the subject, for example "to wash yourself". In social work connections, the concept can be traced back to a theory of socialization concerning how the development of self is made in a dialogue with others. The dialogue is internalised and becomes an inner dialogue between I and me (Mead 1934). Like this the self becomes a unit of dialogue existing by virtue of the conversation with the Other.

In research the concept 'reflexivity' is used to describe how the Self of the researcher is present in scientific investigations and it influences the interpretations during data collection, analysis and results. It is a concept taken into use in the extension of insights about processes of interpretation, brought forward by the phenomenological and hermeneutical theory lines. It is also used to contrast more recent perspectives and directions with the positivist approaches dominating modern science. Instead of trying to avoid influencing the field of study, the researcher is encouraged to be conscious about what she or he brings into the relations being there and what could eventually be changed because of the presence of the researcher. These changes may be interpreted as additional information about the culture studied (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996). The reflexivity perspective may contribute to clarify the researcher subject and the helper subject. They are individuals with their own biographies being consciously or unconsciously brought into work and have impact on the working tasks and on the relations included in work. The researcher is a subject but often registered in writing without it being obvious. Through a reflexive expression form in the written texts, the processes behind the research results may appear. The writer is now included and visible in the text. The aim is to secure that the description is not pretended to be a true copy of the world "as it is", but to show it is a representation of the world from a perspective. It is a constructed reality that is being shown.

Reflexive processes seem to be a central feature of the late modern society. The subject is in focus. An increasing focusing on Self takes place in many different areas. Examples are the many self-developing courses and the instruction books in self improvements (Giddens 1992). Society is more characterized by individualization than by collective thinking and solidarity. The ability of people to self-realization and to choose their own life situation is emphasised. Worthwhile noticing is that the reflexivity "turn" in society may point in two directions. On one hand it may point towards a narcissistic cultivation of self, where the considerations of others wellbeing is lacking. A social work study program may for example be too much characterized by developing personal competence. On the other hand the reflexivity turn in society may point towards the personal responsibility of the self. Reflexive processes in a subject-oriented society may appear in an exaggerated focusing on the private spheres. It may take the form of a "tyranny of intimacy" (Sennet 1992) like in today's mass media images, where the tragedies of clients are embellished in details on the front pages of newspapers. But it may also lead to public attention to the brutal aspects of private lives as a common responsibility, and this same publicity may lead to constructive solutions.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Loftus, E. (1998) *The Price of Bad Memories*, in *Skeptical Inquirer* 22, 23-24 and Payne, David G. (1997) *Compelling Memory Illusions: The Qualitative Characteristics of False Memories*, in *American Psychological Society*, volume 6, number 3.



## **Fieldwork as a model for developing knowledge**

How can the fieldwork of anthropology contribute to a strengthening of social work competence? The qualitative research methods, where fieldwork is central, are directed towards developing knowledge about cultural matters, signifying meaning connections that people live in. One is studying how contextual terms that people relate to, both material and immaterial matters, are expressed as signs and codes in communication and interaction. The researcher must leave his or her desk and set out to the social field to be present there together with her/his informants in their daily life contexts. Developing knowledge demands that the researcher must do fieldwork, including writing down information that comes through observation and conversation. Seeing is the key to the universe of signification, listening gives access to the narratives of people. In short the researcher must be a participator in the social and material surroundings that the life-worlds of the informants consists of. Confident relations between the researcher and the informants are decisive, like in social work. The similarities are several. Also the social worker is concerned by the material and non-material life conditions of the clients. These may be discovered through observing how they are expressed in the home spheres of the clients. To get such information, the social worker must leave her desk, office and counter, to take part in conversations with clients in their home surroundings where their social relations take place.

A research fieldwork must last long enough to make the understanding more detailed and precise while the information is collected and transformed to data. Cultural signs and symbols must be interpreted and analysed before conclusions can be drawn and formulated in writing. It is a process where both researcher and informants participate in the development of knowledge. The research work may be described as a "round dance" between theory, empirical data and method, a situation where the intellect is moving alternately between theories and the empirical field (Wadel 1991). The concrete reality is never left out of sight.

This is a perspective for theory development and scientific knowledge that can be compared with social work. Also in this the client and the helper must cooperate to develop their understanding about the problems needed to be worked on to find solutions. Both must take in to account concrete "data" like events and happenings that may illuminate the situation in question. The task of the social worker may be to utilize her/his theoretical background knowledge to help in an intellectual round dance between reason, emotions and working methods that often can be very painful. A mother who has lost the care for her children needs help to build her understanding in the sorrow about what is happening, to be able to cooperate with the foster home in a continuing part time care for the children. In dialogues between people, understanding and knowledge are developed.

With such a theoretical and methodological approach to social work the worker has to look upon the client in the cultural context, composing of the life-world where problems have developed and are expressed. It can be very important that the professional worker remembers that, in order to adjust appropriate helping measures for a client, he or she has to be willing to move in the milieu of the person. Interpretive and self reflexive perspectives may be good remedies in the work, in order to see how ones own entering and participating in the social context can be part of both increasing despair and understanding, related to what the problems consist of. With such a culture conscious approach, perhaps one can reduce the extent of unsuccessful helping measures. In social work today there is a tendency that home visits are disappearing because of lack of time and resources. This may be counteracted by theoretical approaches making contact with the home context a condition for social work. But how can this be done in a knowledgeable and ethically responsible way, at the same time within frames of law and administration? How to do it without invading or overrunning people or going into some form of inappropriate spying activity? Neither the researcher-informant relation nor the helper-help seeker relation is symmetrical. The power is unevenly distributed (Skau 1992). The perspective of reflexivity includes a consciousness raising about ones own

power position, how it works directing the social encounter and what comes out of it. Every step in the helping process has to take place by means of dialogue and analysis during the ongoing actions.

## **Theory and practice re-personalised**

The culturally analytical perspective in social work may be a step out of the so-called “academisation” the discipline has gone through. The “academisation” concerns bringing knowledge of the practical work into Akademia. There is a tendency in modern society to make knowledge scientific. Higher status is given to abstract rather than practical knowledge (Nyhus 2001). The development and extension of scientific methods and scientific knowledge was a central feature in the change in the Eighteenth Century from a traditional society to the one we have today. The subject of knowledge, the scientist, and the object of science – the world that knowledge was about – became depersonalised. Attention to everything characterising human life and expressed in human communication, was put aside in modern science. The scientist depersonalised both himself and the world he investigated. The result is that workers in caring disciplines often feel that theoretical knowledge is unnecessary (Martinsen 1993). For example, in professional education it is noticed that students often resist accepting the need for theoretical knowledge, when it is not directly related to the practical work (Jenssen 1994). It is important what kind of science is taught. It is possible to teach cultural understanding, methods and theoretical approaches that are closely connected to real life.

In professional debates it is often referred to the fact that health and social disciplines have common interests, but in the medical area comprising most of the health disciplines, the natural sciences are strong and the distance to culture analysis is bigger. It is a problem when social work moves in the direction of diagnostic perspectives and the treatment of illnesses. By insisting on a culturally analytical foundation for social work, one may expect that the social scientific part of social worker’s professional practice will have a precedence over more natural scientific orientated thinking. This could make it easier for social workers to be critical of the conditions in society that create the problems, and to be aware of the need for political opinions and a will to change.

We see that similarities between culture orientated social scientific research and social work is clear. The qualitative method in culture research is fieldwork, which implies observation and participation in the actual culture. Social work has elements of fieldwork included. In a way the client is also doing “fieldwork” during the meeting with the helping system. By focusing on and discussing similarities and differences between the fieldwork method and social work, one may reduce an artificial distance between theory and practice. In some research fields, the researcher also has a motive for change, by critically intervening in the processes studied. Research is never neutral as we know, and the motive involved may be liberation (Habermas 1978), expressing itself in choices of empirical areas where suppression of underprivileged people takes place. An example is research on ethnic minorities and indigenous people fighting for their rights. But research may be obstructed by illegitimate power interests, for example when somebody tries to prevent the researcher from looking into areas of public concern. Also the social worker may be prevented from looking into serious abuse in private situations. Sometimes considerations of privacy are used to hide matters where the responsibility of society should work to protect those who mostly need it.

As a counterbalance against depersonalised theoretical approaches, a culturally analytical perspective can also help in making a distance from the male dominated understanding in institutionalized formal knowledge and open more up to informal competence and ways of thinking belonging to the part of society where women traditionally have had their working places. In our late modern period one can see a repersonalising of knowledge (Jenssen 2000, Hall 1997). To some extent this can be theoretical processes strengthened by women entering

arenas where men were autocratic, like in science and other public power positions. Today human aspects, such as relations and emotions, are more and more accepted and valued within knowledge production. The researcher is a subject in the social field she or he is investigating, as the helper is a subject in the helping system where help and caring work take place, and naturally also in his or her understanding of problems.

Having theoretical perspectives making it possible to understand and act in a manner that the other person is recognized exactly as an Other, is an ethical remedy in practical client work (Levinas 1991). The Other is one who has another cultural point of view, whether it is as gender or as ethnicity or on the background of other cultural differences. In a certain respect the communication is always a cross-cultural communication.

I will summarize finally by showing how a culturally analytical approach in social work has meaning on three levels. The first level is in the understanding of knowledge and in the relation between theory and empirical reality. In the hermeneutic theory tradition from where the interpretive culturally analytical perspective arises, the interpreter is alternating between theoretical concepts and empirical material. The second level is in the understanding of powerful cultures implementing dominance and getting its hegemonies in certain areas. It may concern cultures integrating groups or dividing them. The third level is in the understanding of a single individual world. That means regarding the actions of every single client as part of a horizon of interpretation. At this level is also the interpretive understanding of self. This is a significant aspect in the practical helping measures provided by social workers.

## **Theory and practice re-personalised**

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