WATCHING THE DETECTIVES

REFLECTIONS ON DISSERTATIONS OF MACESS STUDENTS
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Introduction

The somewhat frivolous title belies a serious attempt to make some observations upon research carried out by post-graduate students on the M.A Comparative European Social Studies. It follows an earlier article (Lawrence and Reverda, Social Work in Europe, Vol. 5. No. 3, 1998) which discussed the origin and development of the MACESS course. This article explores the complexity of comparative research as a methodology for exploring social work as a contribution to developing European perspectives on Social Policy and Social Professional Work Theory and Practice.

A guest lecturer on the Research Methods module likened the research process to detective work. In this the role of the researcher is to solve a problem by 'looking for clues'; to investigate, to interview witnesses and participants and to try to establish connections. As tutors on the course we prepare and support students engaging in research projects that form the basis of their dissertation. It is in this sense that we are 'watching the detectives' as they undertake their research projects and it is from that position that we are able to gain an overall picture of the wide choice of topics.

However, it is difficult to put the pieces of the picture together because there are few links between the dissertations, other than that the topics are all connected in some way to social policy and/or social professional work.

But, what is interesting is the way that students theorise social professional work as an area to research. It is possible to differentiate between topics related to policy, those related to practice and those that are a combination of both policy and practice. However this is complicated by the way that students construct both social professional practice and the reality of social research using differing theoretical perspectives. This article is an attempt to use the dissertations as a way of exploring the role of research in our understanding of social professional work. In order to do this we first must place the dissertation within the MACESS context.

2. Social professional work and research

Central to the concept of MACESS is the notion of 'comparative social science', comparing both policy and practice in social work. Within this the 'Comparative Research Module' has four aims:
1. To develop the skills and knowledge necessary to design a research project in the area of social policy/social work, theory and practice.
2. To understand the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative methods.
3. To explore the utility of research findings in affecting organisational change.
4. To enable students to consider the philosophical, ethical and professional issues arising from comparative social research.

Thus the 'subject' of research is comparing social work policy and practice. However this is complicated by the ongoing debate about the 'subject' of social work itself. Within academic circles there is much controversy about the question of 'social work' as a scientific discipline and how this finds expression in the content and context of social work courses. (Paris Conference 2000)

Therefore one may ask - what is the subject of social work that students may have studied already, possibly for three or four years:
- a collection of various disciplines such as sociology, psychology, management and legal studies?
- a collection of ethical principles such as 'anti-discriminatory practice', 'empowerment', participation, equality of opportunity?
- a collection of competencies such as interpersonal skills, groupwork, community work?
- a collection of educational/therapeutic theories that can be applied to working in the social work field with clients?
- or is it a collection of processes that enable the student to 'become' the ethical or reflexive practitioner ?
Perhaps it is all these and more.
This is a highly contested area with little common agreement (Banks 1996, Soulet 1997, 2000 Ssatkaa 2000).
To illustrate this point we want to use the work of Michel Foucault (Rabinow, 1984, Barker,1998) as an exemplar. He asks us to consider the idea of the 'inside' and the 'outside' of a 'subject'. This is not to support the familiar dichotomy of subject/object, but to suggest how concepts are constructed.
In order to understand the subject of Social Work, we have to distinguish between what various social workers would put 'inside the subject'- (how do they conceptualise, describe and analyse the work), and that which they would leave 'outside'.
This is compounded by the fact that the 'subject' is also constructed by various groups, who are not themselves working in the 'subject', but have a view about what ought to be 'inside.' e.g. Government bodies, Associations of Social Workers, Universities etc It is interesting to note these groups could in some situations describe themselves as 'insiders'!

If we accept that the subject of Social Work is a contested area, that there are different attempts to describe the 'inside', then we can begin to see the differences in interpretation:- on what 'object' does the subject 'gaze'?
From the 'gaze' comes the 'seeing' and from the 'seeing' comes the articulation of a language, the construction of a discourse.

At the present time this discourse consists of a language, a terminology into which aspects of human existence are researched, described and interpreted. The discourse is constructed and articulated at the University claiming objectivity in its role in the formulation of knowledge. Within this discourse, the 'objects' of 'empowerment', etc., become curriculum issues, removed from their original context, and placed within a 'neutral' academic context which attempts to objectify these concepts as particular subjects in themselves to be taught.

The notions of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' are important because they seem to imply that the University does not have a vested interest in the type of discourse that is constructed.

Also, this 'neutral' context is not passive, but is dynamic as an arena, in which a number of competing discourses are engaged in a 'will to power' struggle to claim a monopoly in determining the way of the world.

In the context of Social Work, this debate is between the insights from sociology and psychology, (through the discourse of management, as representations of 'appropriate knowledge' required for the profession), and those of philosophy and/or political economy, for example, as areas of enquiry proscribed for the 'mainstream' worker. Such enquiry is often consigned to the boundary or margins of 'professional' social work, often considered 'outside' the subject of Social Work itself..

Also the situation is compounded by the identity or role confusion between the social worker and the social research. Is there an independence of roles and therefore of the purpose of research?

The sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, argues that we need to see this debate between the 'inside' and the 'outside' as a collision between two opposing attempts to define reality - the debate between the legislator and the interpreter. (Bauman, 1997). It is also useful in that it allows us to consider how this debate happens, for example, within sociology or psychology. Social Work training contains elements of sociology and psychology but it is highly selective in that it 'chooses' to present differing schools of these as 'correct' in their interpretation of reality. E.g. Humanistic psychology over Behaviourist, Feminist sociology over Neo-Marxist perspectives. It is our concern not to explore why this happens, obviously some form of selection is inevitable, but to ask how we can understand this process of choice - what objects inform the choice? It is to this that we turn.

3. The social professional as a legislator or interpreter of reality

In order to explore this question it is important to place Social Work within a rapidly changing context.

In various parts of Europe there seems to be a move, not only involving Social Work, but also Community and Youth Work, Teaching, Social Pedagogues etc, to define preparation for these jobs in purely training terms.(e.g in Occupational Standards Consultation Documents,1999).

This change appears to narrow the job to the acquisition of skills or competencies, involving little critical thinking about the process. The job becomes a question of technical skill with workers using a 'bag of tools' to deliver 'good pieces of work', measured, calculated, evaluated and replicated time after time. Various writers argue that this process is the outcome of the dominance of 'managerialism' as a 'totalising discourse' in the provision of public services, identifying ,not only 'appropriate performance, but also, 'appropriate knowledge', that is required to 'do the job'.(Roberts 1998).

The question is, how is this work theorised? How does the technical agenda become THE agenda using its own theories and models of practice? Within this 'technicist' perspective, it becomes possible to deliver (delivery of a 'service' on a provider/receiver relationship), any curriculum area from empowerment, participation, even to research itself, within certain measured models. And are there in the meantime any alternatives to counterbalance this one-sided managerial perception of reality?

In other words, we can consider different interpretations of social work as presented by two contrasting styles of modernity. Responsible human beings and holders of organisational or community authority, can function as either 'legislators' or as 'interpreters' (Bauman,1997).

'Legislators' are individuals who belong to an elite class who have no difficulty in believing in their right to orchestrate reality for the majority of humankind. They express the continuing self consciousness of a rational modernity which believes in its right to control. They may, within democratic systems, periodically seek the consent of mass populations but their consciousness is uncorrupted by uncertainty (Roberts,1998).

By contrast, interpreters, 'regard reality as plural, differentiated, a complex cohabitation of many lifeworlds, each of which has a measure of legitimacy for those who inhabit them. Interpreters do not control in overt hegemonic terms; rather they seek to explain, to understand and to negotiate through dialogic thought' (Roberts, ibid).

Thus, just as the 'interpreter' is reluctant to claim the revelation of absolute truth but to suggest possible ways forward in a dialogue, the 'legislator' seizes the opportunity to define reality.

These two opposing perspectives can find expression in the field of research and can help us to understand how research is constructed as a means of producing certain kinds of evidence. Also they can help us to see how research itself is not above suspicion in becomes part of the overall process of

the social construction of reality. The current debates about the role and purpose of research, both in terms of philosophy and methodology, are an inevitable outcome of this process and indeed finds a place on the MACESS course.

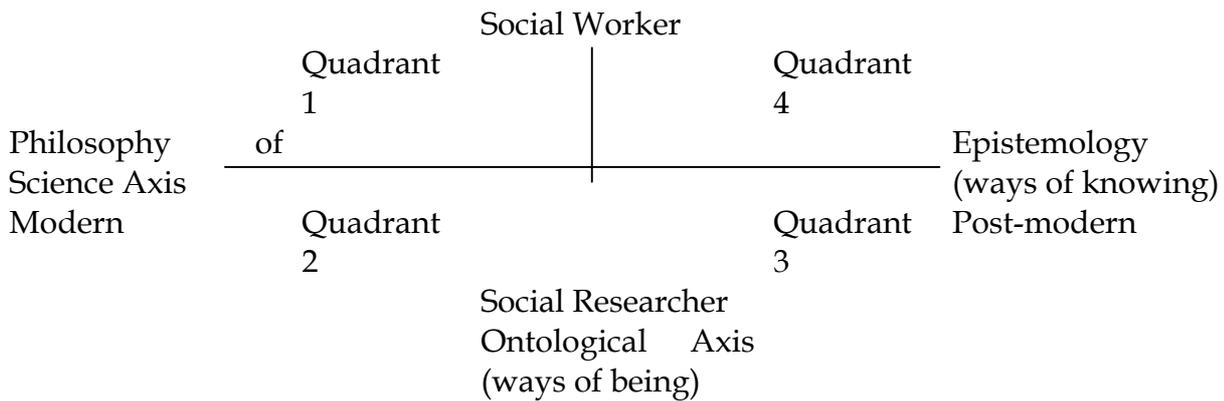## 4. Research in social professional work: the MACESS experience

We have been concerned to demonstrate how the construction of discourse can lead to conflicting perspectives, particularly in the definitions of 'social research and social work. This can lead to a paradox;

First, social work is frequently defined in terms that imply its non-existence in the scientific world, and imply that definition does not matter. Second, and perhaps more significant , is that the term, 'social work', is used to label phenomena or events that are believed to exist but are unknowable, unseen, or cannot be explained' (Soulet,1997).

This paradox could be seen as limiting attempts at understanding but we suggest that an exploration of the research into social work suggests that social work can be conceptualised in a way that preserves its mysteriousness while facilitating an

understanding of social work within the context of practice, which is the students field of work.

We can offer an interpreters view of the relationship between social work and the social sciences. Faced with the absence of conceptual models for social work within its own field, we suggest that it is possible to adapt Reed's 'Multiparadigm Model of Spirituality' for Research into Social Work:

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                          Social Worker
                 Quadrant              Quadrant
                 1                      4
Philosophy       of                                    Epistemology
Science Axis     ─────────────────┼─────────────       (ways of knowing)
Modern           Quadrant              Quadrant         Post-modern
                 2                      3
                          Social Researcher
                          Ontological    Axis
                          (ways of being)
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' The horizontal axis represents an epistemological framework in terms of scientific approaches to knowledge development and ways of knowing, which range from modern to post-modern, from the legislator to the interpreter. It also represents paradigm shifts as research models and methods are deconstructed and reconstructed in the move from 'traditional' scientific approaches(modern) to 'new' alternative or naturalistic paradigms (post modern) (Braud and Anderson 1998).

The vertical axis represents an ontology of the 'social' in terms of ways of being a social worker and/or the social researcher and the reforming nature of humans. The axis reflects the professional identification that is found in the way that students consider themselves as social workers or as researchers within the context of social research and how they see the research as a 'change-agent'.

The model creates four paradigms expressed as quadrants and each paradigm is based upon constructions of 'social worker' and 'social researcher' and how research reflects a modern or post-modern philosophy of science.

Also the four paradigms represent arenas of praxis, a perspective through which links are made between the values of philosophy, the ideals of scientific research and the realities of practice.

The first quadrant is bounded by a social workers view of research and a modernist view of philosophy of science.

Within this, research is understood in terms of a dualist view, in which social work is informed by positivist application of empirical scientific methods. In this quadrant the role of research is to clarify and enhance the theory and practice of social work. The social

work practitioner enables the client to be 'objective' about their rights and to facilitate 'user-involvement' in the practice.

An example of this from the MACESS dissertations is an analysis of Quality and Pedagogy in day Care Centres comparing the Netherlands and Denmark. The day care centres are identified as places that working parents can place their children during worktime. The emphasis is on the quality of care delivered by the professionals ':

"The training of the staff is different in the two countries and influences the way of working. The pedagogical concepts which are the basis of the way of working do not differ much." (Corina van Haren, 1999).

In this piece of research the student identifies herself with a very clear, specific context which also falls within the remit of social work. She uses statistics to show the number of children in day care centres and to demonstrate causal factors in the growing interest in these centres:

- children spend more time in day care services and it is 'society's interest to deliver care of good quality,
- increased competition amongst day care organisations,
- the growing demand of especially 'high educated' parents who both have a job.

She also advances arguments for a European wide consultation process to implement the findings of a European Commission Report in 1992 called 'Network on Children', although accepting that this would be difficult. One can identify the link between social work and the research and the concern of a wider 'society. Indeed the evidence seems to speak for itself and this evidence is produced by comparing statistical information, models of practice researched by questionnaires, observations and interviews. The methodology is taken for granted as a recognised means of collecting and collating information. The assumption is that there are shared models and methods within the practice of social work which transgresses national boundaries.

The second quadrant is bounded by social researcher and modern philosophy of science. Within this, the researcher adopts a neutral position with no commitment to the field of social work but rather to the socio-political context. Social work is seen as part of the overall welfare provision and can be researched in the same way that takes place within other parts of the state. Thus findings may not only be relevant to social work but to policy makers. There is an assumption of 'neutrality' on the part of the researcher and the role of the researcher is to suggest ways forward but not to make recommendations.

An example of this from the MACESS dissertations is research into 'Social assistance and stigma' comparing factors which lead to, and factors which may reduce "stigma', in Germany and Norway. The research is in a clearly defined context and the role of the research is clear:

"The intention of this document is to find out how social assistance can be delivered with less stigma for the clients" (Thor E. Ellefsen, 1999). By taking an 'objective' approach, the methodology employed is taken for granted using quantitative data collection, questionnaires, statistical analysis surveys and interviews with recipients of social assistance.

The dissertation compared the situation in both countries and found that there was little difference in the concept of the Welfare State and 'clients ' had similar experiences in applying for and the receipt of social assistance. The way forward may be 'to reduce

stigma connected to being a client of social assistance would be to change from a means testing system to a system of guaranteed minimum income for everyone'. (Thor E. Ellefsen, 1999)

The first and second quadrant are linked by an assumption of the scientific base of both social work and research, set in a known context The assumption is that there are shared ideals and values within the field of social research and that these can be applied cross nationally.

In both of these quadrants the client or 'object of research' is clearly identified and can be either 'identified', in social work terms, or 'researched', in social research terms. Whether they be a social worker or researcher the overarching philosophy is that the there is a rational scientific approach to deal with social problems which can lead to a better society.

The third quadrant is bounded by social researcher and a post-modern philosophy of science. This quadrant supports perhaps humanistic and holistic perspectives with emphasis on the individual actors involved in research. Thus research permeates the life of the person and dualistic models are rejected. Within this paradigm the relationship between the researcher and the researched is described as a presence, it is lived experience. The researcher may use a variety of approaches borrowing from humanistic psychology or cultural studies of language, although there is a split from an identified practice. Research has a key role in bringing about a change in society but the nature of that change is brought about by the participants who are integral to the process.

An example of this from the dissertations is research in to 'The Role of external aid in the empowerment of Civil Societies in Developing Countries - the Uganda example.' (Catherine H.S. Mwine 1999) This involved a 'Comparative study between external aid from the Netherlands and the UK'. The purpose of the study was to explore new 'paradigms' in external aid agencies which recognise structural changes that favour collective empowerment, participation of all the people and sustainability of the empowerment process.

A central part of this research was the researcher herself. Using her own experiences as a Ugandan woman, being involved in projects in receipt of aid, having access to womens groups in particular projects, she is able to use the research process as means of empowering those groups. She concludes 'it has always been other actors and not the users who have a say in higher level decisions in district, national, regional or global institutions. Thus the poor remain poorer and powerless at the end of the development project' (Mwine, 1999). She advocates new ways of monitoring and evaluating external aid which are controlled by the user groups themselves.

It is clear that the researcher is immersed in the process and indeed is identified as integral to the outcome. This research becomes the springboards for action for groups, there is a shared value system of commitment to social justice for the 'poor and oppressed' and the role of research in achieving changed social conditions.

The fourth quadrant is bounded by social work practice and a post-modern philosophy of science. Within this paradigm social workers and clients are linked as human beings' and social work contributes to the overall development of a new` society. Within this paradigm the label of 'client is rejected and the person and presence of the social work

practitioner are essential elements in this process and those involved grow together. Social work is seen as an activity which encourages the person through educational experiences and environments to achieve a greater understanding of themselves and through this the practice of social work is refined and often redefined.

An example of this from the MACESS dissertations is a study entitled The 'west and the rest' or How to navigate in Cháos' (Dorte Gam, 1999). This research investigated 'multicultural competencies and challenges in daily kindergarten practice'. The methodology employed was a series of recorded interviews with workers about their practice, particularly in their relationships to children and with one another. The intention was 'to highlight the cocktail of work, passion and knowledge which the teachers have and thus to advance practice' The style of presentation was a narrative which used Rogilds 'socio-fiction' (Rogilds, 1995) as a model and attempted a 'balance between identification/familiarising and interpretation, between the problems and themes occurring in the interviews and the theoretical reflections they cause' (Dorte Gam, 1999) Thus the dissertation included details of the interviews involving setting, time of day, body language, pauses which in part read almost like a novel

There is clear identification with the person and the pedagogue and the role of the research is to enhance practice through a series of discussions and reflections that are almost free flowing. The methods used can be described as action based related to a field of work and involve qualitative exploration of the nature of human contact in all its contexts, not only between the pedagogue and the young person.

In both of these quadrants there are no shared assumptions and the work and research can be considered as context free - there are no parameters. Within this, the post-modern perspective allows the worker or researcher to reclaim the activity, to reject legislating tendencies in favour of new ways of 'interpreting' experience. There is a rejection, not only of the traditional methods, but also of the conceptualising of the Other defined as either Object or Client. There is also the recognition that only the 'client' or the 'poor' can articulate their exclusion and argue and build strategies for their inclusion. Also there is the recognition of the importance of the voice of the worker to figure in discussions about outcomes. Thus both social work and research are not neutral and prefigure in the creation of social justice.

We suggest that the application of this model allows us to see the various forces at work in the interplay between values, theories, skills and the modern/post modern scientific based discourse within the field of 'praxis'. But what of the future?

5. Conclusion: can we re-enchant social research?

Zygmunt Bauman argues that;
'Post-modernity is, perhaps more that anything else, a state of mind and all in all it can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away: as a re-enchantment of the world that modernity tried hard to dis-enchant' (Bauman, ibid).

The current interest in research across a number of professional boundaries may be seen as an awareness of the importance of adopting holistic perspectives in contemplating our humanity within ourselves and in our relationships with others.

The purpose of the Dissertations on the MACESS course is to engage students in critical reflections on the field of the social welfare professions, to begin to evaluate 'traditional' methods and assess alternative ways of doing research. 'After all we don't count the poor just to count them, we don't study refugees just because they are there!' Every project has both content and context and both Social Work and research are reflections of different starting points. The MACESS course attempts to re-enchant what is often described as a disenchanted profession, disenchanted by the pronouncements and initiatives of policy-makers or the legislative process

It appears that the legitimating tendency of 'legislators' has dominated understanding, determined skills and knowledge that is required for social work and social research for a long time. Indeed the current demand for 'evidence based' social policy responses is indicative of this - you must prove 'need exists'.

However other approaches suggest that we are all unique persons and that our analyses can only offer an interpretation of reality, we cannot legislate for one another. Thus the role of research in social work is to facilitate our interpretations of our experiences, to enhance our understanding of the complexity of human interaction in both social work and other fields.

This identification of 'research' can lead to the re-enchantment of the profession in that it identifies not only that researchers 'do' the work but 'are involved in' the work, both 'of the work and for the work'- a synthesis of 'being and doing'. The model offered above suggests that postmodernity demands a re-appraisal of the 'professional identity', an exploration of what the future may be for Social Work.

Social workers are challenged to seek solutions to many problems, some so difficult that they may be almost overwhelmed. It is important to feel 'free' to find answers wherever one may look . Post modernity may provide the backdrop for the search, it is both a journey out into society and into the imagination encountering both understanding and mystery of the human condition as external and internal realities.

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