

What is Valid Knowledge for Social Workers?

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Introduction: validity, knowledge and social work

Social workers in some European countries claim that what they learn during their studies is not applicable to what they are expected to do when they start working. What is useful knowledge for social workers in the field might be different from what is considered valid for academics who rarely see clients. In some countries, academics might not have practised social work, or only at the beginning of their careers. Thus, they might not be familiar with the context in which social work is practised, and it therefore becomes difficult if not impossible, to teach *how* to do social work in a convincing way. The result might be that the students are taught about *who* and *what* instead of *how*. Consequently, students may not gain practical help in professional relationships with people. A social worker complained to one of the authors about the irrelevance of role-plays during her studies. Most of her clients are single men who live on social security benefits. Some might threaten her, some have abused their wives, some been in prison, all provoking her feelings and attitudes in one way or other. Her role-plays had been about interviewing families who were asked to come to the office for a meeting. They had not been as complicated or conflictual as the work she now experiences. However, even if educators are familiar with social workers' working conditions, it is rather difficult to construct a 'real world' learning environment in the classroom.

Likewise, in the UK both employers and graduates have complained that social work education is not relevant for the job requirements (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). Beginning social workers do not have in-depth knowledge about specialist fields nor are they trained to become bureaucrats. The print and broadcast media are quick to criticise social workers' activities, from a user or carer perspective, from a particular political or social perspective or from the perspective of a concerned but uninformed and possibly prejudiced citizen. We draw from this that actors in different arenas have

their differing expectations of what social work is all about.

What, faced with these differing expectations and their own uncertainties, is valid knowledge for social workers? To ask this question raises issues about validity, knowledge and social work. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of those issues. Our ideas are derived from the British and Norwegian contexts and literature but we also draw on wider perspectives and literature to illustrate our argument. We argue in the paper that social work requires knowledge to be validated, and that this is so in any profession. Validity is an end-state, the point at which knowledge is accepted, and the existence of this state implies a process by which the acceptance is achieved. Thus, the creation and use of knowledge within a profession is a social process, taking place in various arenas. Payne (1999) identifies political and social arenas, professional and agency arenas and interpersonal arenas between social workers and clients, carers and the community within which social workers operate. Knowledge may have differing validities in different times, contexts and arenas of action. It is constructed by the people involved (according to their role and stake in knowledge creation), the social processes of knowledge use, and the social context in which they are operating.

Some views of professions and professionalisation propose an identifiable knowledge base as one of the essential characteristics of a profession (Greenwood, 1957; Torgersen, 1972). Among modern examples of such an assumption is the opening statement of Reamer's authoritative text: "From its roots in the charity organisation society and settlement house movements, social work has evolved into a full-fledged profession with a distinctive value base, *body of knowledge*, and method of training." (Reamer, 1994: p. 2; our emphasis)

Another example is the comment on the international definition of social work recently approved by International Federation of Social Work (IFSW)/International Association of Schools

of Social Work (IASSW):

“Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation, including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context.” (IFSW News, 2/2000).

If we take this view, knowledge that is validated within a profession, being distinctive, is characteristic of that profession, and less characteristic of others. Therefore, a profession is partly characterised by its validated knowledge and the validation processes are a crucial element in understanding the character and achievement of the profession. This has consequences for social work.

This is because a particular characteristic of social work, which influences the validation process, is its unique position of operating at the crossroads of management and treatment, of professional work and politics, and of multidisciplinary theories and approaches. Social workers therefore need to have a broad knowledge base, rather than an in-depth one. Consequently, professionals from other disciplines may easily deny or underestimate social workers' knowledge bases. However, in our post-modern times multi- and interdisciplinary knowledge is increasingly useful. Yet, sometimes doctoral students have difficulties in getting interdisciplinary theses accepted, and in the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise¹ has a record of presenting difficulties with the assessment of interdisciplinary studies. These examples point to some of the problems social workers have in claiming the validity of their knowledge base.

Another characteristic that follows from the crossroads position is that many stakeholders may claim to have a say in the validation process. Those who might have a stake include academics, educators, professionals, administrators, politicians, users, carers, and the media. Stakeholders occupy a variety of different positions in arenas of discourse about a profession. Their opinions might potentially interact in the construction of valid knowledge for social workers. However, often politicians interact with other politicians, academics with academics, professionals talk to other professionals, and users and carers talk among themselves. Therefore, adequate arrangements have to be established for exchanges to take place across the barriers.

Stakeholders influence validation through their roles in the creation of knowledge, its transfer between different people and its use. If we take empowerment seriously, the user perspective would be the most important. Empowerment may be needed both for the professional and the user, since both are likely to have the least status, authority and power to influence validation processes.

To understand social work, therefore, we must understand how knowledge is validated within the profession. The points already made suggest that social work is similar to other professions in some of its validation processes and that it also has some characteristics within its validation processes that are distinctive. In this introductory section, we discuss briefly some basic ideas about validity, knowledge and social work as a preliminary to considering social work's validation of professional knowledge.

Validity

Validity has two related but different meanings. It implies that something is approved in some formal way, as a document or contract gains validity by being signed and stamped or sealed with an official mark. Validity also implies worth and usefulness, so that when we say that a question about something is valid, we accept that it is reasonable to ask it. Knowledge becomes valid only when people find it meaningful to them and want to use it.

Our starting point would deny the existence of universal knowledge in social work. Therefore, meanings and the use of meanings by various stakeholders hide the impact of authority and power on validity. Either the power of formal approval or the power of use and value is integral to validity. However, knowledge that is formally approved might not be valid for use to people in differing situations. For example, where stakeholders are from different cultures and countries, or from different minority, gender, age or class groups the validation processes applied to particular knowledges may not mean anything to them in their context. For example, in an exchange programme, one of the authors was in Tanzania and visited a social work agency. The social workers responded to a question about applying learning that confidentiality was among the important things they had learned at the school of

social work. The textbooks they had used were mainly English and American. There were two desks in the office, three social workers, five clients, and one chair, where the author was seated. An important task was to organise travel to their home villages for people who suffered from AIDS. How could confidentiality in a Western meaning of the concept be practiced under these circumstances? Some knowledge might be taken for granted in some cultures, while in others it is not acceptable due to ideology, value and political systems or practical circumstances such as the Tanzanian agency. Therefore, the power of validity is bound up in existing social relationships and structures.

Validity also implies a process. A document is changed by a process of validation from something neutral into something that has the power to influence or have impact upon others. When someone accepts something as valid, they have been through some process of recognition of it and assessment of its worth, and they claim to have the authority or power to validate it in some way.

Knowledge

Knowledge and its nature are controversial. It implies human thoughts and ideas about the world, including thoughts and ideas about human beings. However, we understand more than this because, if we categorise thoughts and ideas as 'knowledge', we mean that they are 'true', that in some way they reflect the world accurately. Because knowledge is human thoughts and ideas, it is internal to us and the controversy arises because our knowledge may be only thoughts and ideas, unconnected with any external world. However, knowledge is closely bound up with the idea of action, because we accept ideas and thoughts as knowledge when they allow us to act in the world and gain predictable results.

Knowledge is closely connected to validity and validation, therefore, because integral to the idea of knowledge is acceptance of its usefulness in actions that affect the world. Leonard (1983) shows that, throughout social work's history, ideological trends of the time influence social work knowledge and methods. He also points out that social workers are ideologically blind in relation to our present time. In Western societies of today, particularly the Anglophone ones, individualism is a ruling ideology. A social work method that has achieved growing influence in Western countries is the solution-focused approach, which is highly

individualistic. It opposes an analysis of the problem-creating forces. Therefore, it fails to offer an understanding of such areas of knowledge as political systems, poverty, class, race, minority and female oppression.

Validation also implies the sense of formalisation. To be used, knowledge must be expressed at least in conscious ideas, more probably in language and often in some medium of communication so that it may be shared. Widely agreed and accepted expressions of ideas in permanent media such as books or journals are a formal expression of knowledge. Publication processes are also validation processes, implying acceptance by others.

Social work

Social work may be seen either as an activity (that is, something that is done), or as a profession, that is, a formally organised occupational group (Payne, 1996). In either case, it is bound up with knowledge. We have seen that knowledge is in close relation to action, so social work as an activity requires knowledge to permit action. In turn, to act with purpose requires knowledge, of the situation in which action takes place, of the purpose and of the actions that might be taken. We have also seen that understanding social work as a profession involves considering its distinctive knowledge and its knowledge validation processes. To understand social work requires seeing it as both action and structure and trying to understand the connections between these two elements.

Validity in social work knowledge

We have argued that social work incorporates both action and also structure. This classic distinction in sociology questions the extent to which social structure conditions people's actions, or to which people's actions are capable of forming social structures. In social work, this distinction raises the question of the extent to which social structures constrain the possibilities of practice, or to which social work practices may construct the profession, agency and political policies and social change.

Consequently, validity of knowledge in social work requires both validity in the activity and validity for the profession and social influence. In the same way, social work values balance objectives of personal growth for clients and social justice and change. Attempts to justify validity in one but not the other are unlikely to be successful. Hence, the

complaints described at the outset of this paper make claims that knowledge developed through academic processes is unhelpful for practice, while others claim that knowledge solely used in practice cannot be substantiated with sufficient evidence to be acceptable as knowledge in the academic sense.

To argue in this way, however, takes the position that there must be only one knowledge or type of knowledge for a profession, and one process that validates it. Instead, we suggest that there may be a range of knowledges used in different contexts for different purposes. If this is so, how may we understand the process of validation? To consider this, we need to examine more closely arenas of discourse about social work. Payne (1999) identifies three useful arenas to consider in the construction of social work from a potentially infinite number: the political-social arena, the agency-professional arena and the client-worker arena. Other arenas might easily be identified, including the research-academic arena. While a range of potential arenas for discourse about social work activity and profession exist, these four arenas include a variety of stakeholders and discourses, particularly if we consider social work academics to be included in the agency professional arena and as contributors to the construction of the worker-client arena.

In the political-social arena, knowledge for social work is validated by policy debate, political power and social discourse, in, for example, the media, about what kinds of knowledge are valid for use in social work. In the agency-professional arena, knowledge is validated by such processes as the creation of agency policy and professionally derived standards of practice. Agency policy may emerge from political or managerial policies, while professionally validated practice may emerge from such processes as team discussion, seminars, supervision, the work of professional associations and professional and academic journals. Both might be influenced by research and theoretical models. In the client-worker arena, the process of validation is interpersonal: validation is by service users' acceptance of the worker's knowledge.

Service users (clients) may have an impact on the validity of knowledge used by social workers in both interpersonal actions and more widely in the professions. In interpersonal work, for example, a mother may reject the child-care advice of a worker who does not have her own children, since the mother values experience rather than academic

understanding of child development. One of the authors (in Norway) was invited to work with a group of lone parents on communication skills. One of the participants confided to the group leader afterwards that she wanted so badly to find out if the author would accept her using corporal punishment in socialising her children. Because if she did not, she would not believe in anything else she said either. This kind of testing out may be more apparent with social work than other similar professions because of the tasks that social workers seek to undertake at the crossroads of management and treatment. Knowledge conveyed by a psychologist or a doctor, for example, may be more easily accepted because it is represented as expertise about an unusual psychological or medical disorder, whereas social workers claim to help clients adjust to the 'normal' world, where experience is a more valid form of knowledge.

Service users may question the validity of knowledge in political ways, as well as in interpersonal arenas. For example, the disability movement has sought to invalidate medical, dependency-creating models of disability in favour of social models. Processes of validation are among the social mechanisms by which existing power and authority is maintained, and change is resisted. If only one knowledge is validated or one type of validation process accepted in a particular arena, a hierarchy of knowledges arises, in which one type or source of knowledge is privileged against others. An example of this, currently topical in the UK and some other North European countries, is the argument in support of 'evidence-based practice', which privileges particular ways of validating knowledge for professional purposes. This argument proposes that evidence-based knowledge should be regarded as of higher status or greater value than knowledge derived from other processes.

Since we have noted that several knowledges originate in different arenas, attempts to create such a hierarchy subordinate some validation processes to others. In the academic or political arenas, for example, evidence-based knowledge may be more valued than workers' and clients' personal experience, which in turn might be more valued in practice. However, this interpersonal validation is substantially different from validation through political processes, through academic or professional processes or research. Often, commitment to particular knowledges simply leads to rejection of understandings that might be more

strongly validated by alternative processes. In the agency-professional arena, commitment to practices because of organisational requirement, or because of training inculcated at an earlier stage in a worker's career, may limit the acceptance of even strongly evidenced knowledge. In the interpersonal arena, a user may reject what research says is effective because they find it uncongenial and this may make it impossible for a worker to implement some evidence-based knowledge. For example, in the UK context, Howe (1989) has shown that some clients do not accept the family therapy approach because its explanatory framework does not fit with their expectations. The evidence may well be better validated according to professional or academic validation processes, but this does not make it any more possible to implement it.

We must therefore reject the idea that, in practice, knowledges can be formed into a hierarchy by the strength of their validation, because that validation may only be relevant to a particular arena. If we take the stance that all different ways of creating knowledge have their own assets depending on the circumstances, it is irrelevant to classify them in a hierarchy. In practice, such hierarchies may come up against completely different forms of validation. If a hierarchical analysis of different knowledges is not practically possible, how are we to understand the relationships between different types of knowledge?

Knowledges in social work

Knowledge is in dispute within social work. Various kinds of knowledge have been considered. For example, Reisby (1999) distinguishes between knowing *that*, which is knowing something about the world, and knowing *how*, that is, knowing how to act upon the world. The former has a higher status than the latter. Another example is the debate between proponents of realist views that privilege universal, evidence-based knowledge and social construction views, which privilege contextualised, naturally-derived knowledge. A further example is the rural-urban context (Briskman, 1999). Most social work literature is developed and written about from an urban perspective, in relation to social policy, problems, and how to understand and deal with them. Academics producing social work knowledge are mainly situated in urban environment. If they write about rural issues, this will be from a visitors' or

outsiders' perspective.

Countries, including the USA, UK and many in Europe, where much of the professional literature is produced, have urban societies whereas countries where the international literature is used, such as Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Scandinavian countries, have strong rural communities. Knowledge developed from an urban perspective, may be difficult to use for social workers in rural settings. Different questions derived from various contexts may be required to produce valid knowledge in different settings. All these examples suggest that one type of knowledge is not better than another in a practice activity such as social work, and that validated knowledge will need to take account of different settings and situations. So, in addition to our argument that a hierarchy of types of validation is impossible in social work, knowledge in social work must incorporate different types of knowledge.

We argue that, in social work as in other professions, validation processes constantly adapt and structure different types of knowledge between different arenas, rather than create hierarchies of knowledge or validation. To understand how this takes place, we explore how different types of knowledge interact, using Jensen's (1993) analysis of three different types of knowledge for professional people: life-historical knowledge, traditional professional knowledge and scientific knowledge. These three types of knowledge are constructed in different arenas of social work discourse.

Different knowledges are often associated in part with different arenas. Scientific knowledge means knowledge produced through formal research and scholarship, mainly in the academic arena, rather than limiting this to realist or positivist knowledge production. Life-historical knowledge is what students have acquired through life experience, deriving from political-social arenas. It is similar to Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge (1983), that is understanding about the world acquired in normal living, which is taken-for granted, and not expressed or formulated in an organised way, but which is available and may be used for practical purposes. The important difference is that Jensen's emphasis is on life-historical knowledge being obtained from experience relevant to professional action and understanding. Life-historical knowledge is, similarly, rarely reflected on, but becomes visible

in practical situations. It is not necessarily conceptualised and accessible for analysis and reconstruction. Jensen (1992,1993) maintains that if life-historical knowledge is not made conscious during education, students might not be able to combine it with other knowledges. Instead of contributing to professional development, it might then unconsciously create uncertainty and aggression. When life-historical knowledge is made accessible to the students during their learning process, it becomes possible to use this knowledge to go beyond the alienation that often characterises professional relationships (Eriksen, 1990; Jensen, 1992;1993:37).

Professional knowledge is based in the traditions and experiences collected and formalised within a profession, mainly in the worker-agency arena. It becomes accessible to others in a profession through considered and accountable participation over time, so that members of a profession create a specific culture, containing shared knowledge. An example in social work of such knowledge is knowledge acquired through professional supervision, where a student or inexperienced worker gains understanding through a close, reflective relationship with a supervisor. To be professional implies, in addition to becoming familiar with such 'traditional' knowledge, taking a critical perspective so that professionals themselves are able to renew, improve and develop the profession (Jensen, 1993:40).

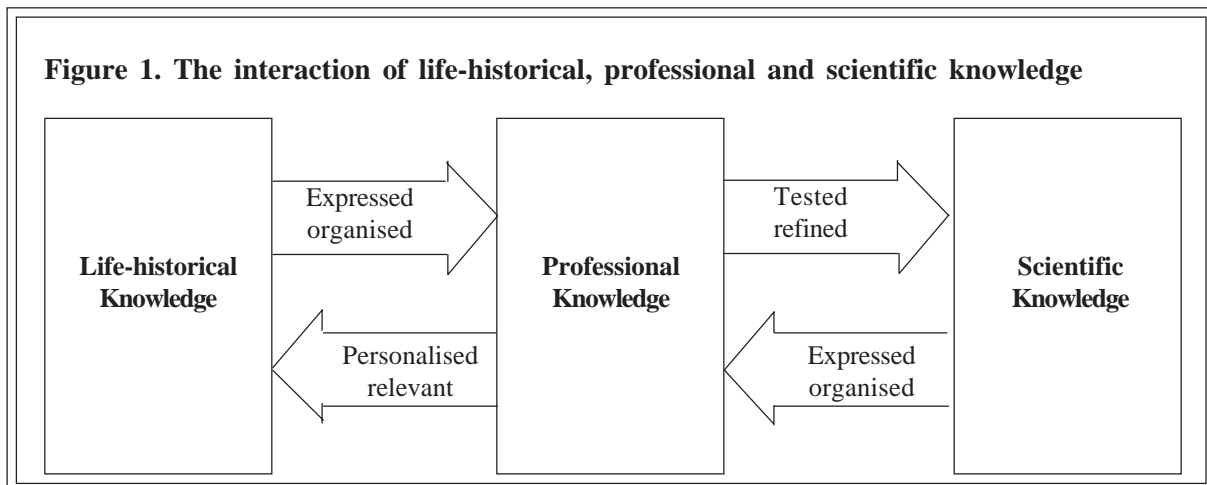
Jensen proposes that scientific knowledge may be a prism through which a worker might interpret, organise and consequently validate the knowledge gained through life-historical and professional knowledge and transform scientific knowledge into practice. Guidance for practice does not directly arise from scientific knowledge, while professional knowledge consists of examples, including many

situations where professional adjustment and discretion will take place (Jensen, 1993).

Considering these three forms of knowledge together, scientific knowledge will inevitably have to be modified by professional and life-historical knowledge. Life-historical knowledge will be modified by professional knowledge derived from experience and mediated by scientific knowledge. Professional and life-historical knowledge will be tested and amended by scientific processes. The processes are expressed in the diagram, Figure 1. Working the other way, scientific knowledge is adjusted by discretion and practical requirements arising in professional work, and personalised and made relevant to service users and clients by being adapted through life-historical experience.

The processes by which different forms of knowledge are adjusted and incorporated into professional use are institutionalised within any profession. For example, in social work life-historical knowledge is mediated through professional supervision, where personal experience in relation to practice is often discussed. Professional knowledge is originated through discussion and planning between colleagues and scientific knowledge is produced in academic arenas in processes around research, journals and books. These processes overlap. For example, ideas developed in supervision may be shared with the team and used more widely. Scientific knowledge may be conveyed through agency training, seminars and meetings and professional journals rather than more academic processes.

Each of these processes is a validation process. Scientific knowledge is validated for practice by being adjusted and interpreted. Being made personally relevant makes it, and professional



knowledge, useful in relation to service users. Life-historical and professional experience goes through formalising, testing and refining processes, to become, possible, scientific knowledge.

Influences on the validation process

This process of interpretation and refinement also takes place between other arenas of social work discourse. For example, professional journals and agency manuals may not be considered as valid as academic research validated by publication in leading journals, but may have direct relevance for practice. Equally, agency manuals may be valid as guidance for professionally trained social workers, but their language and form may be less relevant for less qualified staff and often need to be interpreted for working with service users. Life-historical experience may help workers to understand the context of the experiences of service users, even if it cannot be formulated in academic terms.

These processes are affected by power relations. In each of the social processes within which knowledge is adapted and validated, gender and other power relations, affect the social relationships involved. The following example shows how easily female knowledge is disqualified, and how this validation process starts early in life. During the Gulf war in 1991, a male teacher was concerned that girls in his class of twelve-year-olds were uninterested in what was going on. He was impressed by the boys' preoccupation with the bombing of Iraq, discussing, for example, the precision of the rockets and margins of error in targeting. When questioned about what the girls did, he reported they were writing poems. Investigating what was going on, Gulbrandsen (1993:44) found that they were concerned with how people survived. How did they get water? Would anybody dare to dig out their ruined houses? For how long could they survive in a dark cellar? What did they do when they needed to go to the toilet? This showed that the girls were as up-to-date in knowledge about the war as the boys, but had different interests and concerns. According to Gulbrandsen, the male teacher had taken a clear stance about what was valid knowledge and despised the girls' worries, dismissing them as feelings. The girls used their life-historical knowledge to ask questions about social conditions relevant for social work.

Many journals publish more work from male rather

than female writers, even though social work has a strong female membership. The validation processes of academic journals and books may be assumed to have universal application, but reflect the particular cultural preferences and the dominance of the English language in academic globalisation. In social work, for example, there has been criticism from Africa and Asia of social work's individualised approach and its failure to recognise the social needs of developing countries or more interdependent cultures. The social and power context of life and practice, therefore, creates variations in the validity of particular forms of knowledge. Social processes privilege certain kinds of knowledge or information. Life-historical and professional knowledge is often undervalued. For example, in many countries, books are few and the accessible theoretical and professional literature is not contextualised because it is written for a different culture and experience. As such contextualisation has to take place in local situations, traditional professional knowledge transferred via working in a professional setting and by supervision becomes more important. In all situations, knowledge transferred through books and journals is likely to lag behind professional knowledge and life-historical knowledge. Scientific knowledge is created where the resources are made available for research and publication.

This means that it mainly occurs in rich Western countries, in urban areas, and is achieved by white people, mostly male, people in command of a world language. Within such power relations, social work is not generally a prioritised area for research. An example of this occurs in the way the European Union, emphasises technical, scientific and business development. This means that creation of scientific knowledge in social work is biased in two ways. First, it unjustifiably claims for this type of knowledge a higher status in a hierarchy of knowledge than knowledges created through experiential, tacit, situated learning. This disempowers people from developing countries, rural areas, minority groups, and women. Second, in failing to incorporate knowledges from other arenas, it excludes forms of knowledge that might be interpreted into scientific form, thus losing a rich source of knowledge for social work practice. Our focus on seeing validation less as a process of approval leading to a hierarchy of knowledge and more as a process of interpretation and refinement between different types of knowledge required for different arenas of discourse seeks to avoid this disempowering process and open up the possibility

of knowledge being transferred between different arenas of social work discourse.

Empowering validation of knowledge in social work

How may we understand and develop the validation of knowledge in social work? We have suggested that it must be seen as comprising processes of interpretation and refinement between bodies of knowledge, so that it is empowering, rather than disempowering. The concept of 'transfer of learning' usefully characterises validation processes as a way of transferring knowledge between arenas of discourse about social work. Cree and Macaulay (2001) present a variety of means by which this might be done, and these are not further considered here.

The processes within social work that enable these interactions between different knowledges include education and training, management and supervision, teamwork and collaboration, and interpersonal work with service users. Each of these processes implies different priorities. Thus, the researcher aims to influence the educator and the practitioner, the educator aims to improve the learner's professional competence, the manager is concerned with the quality of the worker's practice, and the practitioner is concerned with users' progress. However, within these priorities, the overall purpose is transferring knowledge through learning to the benefit of a service that helps the user. The users' benefit is not only achieved interpersonally with them, but also by change in their social environment, within the agency's service, within the range of services provided in society and by general social changes that alter the historical context in which the work is carried out. While working with the user, it is hard to keep all these possible developments in view. Thus focusing on differing priorities does not exclude the user's benefit, but merely interprets it in the different contexts. Transfer of learning through knowledge validation in different contexts ensures that varieties of knowledge affect each other within the overall context of service to the user. Social work processes include different, but overlapping, stakeholders.

An example of how arenas may overlap each other has occurred in Norway where multisystemic therapy (MST) has been introduced in youth care. A debate about adequate treatment of delinquency

had been going on, and it had been a growing market for private agencies, when the Ministry of Social Affairs (after some inquiry) found, towards the end of the nineties, that MST was appropriate. The ministry implemented a pilot project, carried out by the child care unit in some counties. It is planned to make it gradually accessible all over the country, and is now offered in all but two counties. MST was developed at the University of Carolina. It is an evidence-based treatment, which integrates different methods of working into a holistic approach. The purpose is to strengthen parental functioning, and treatment takes place primarily in the family home. The parents are considered equal partners, and have the main responsibility for goal setting and implementation. The therapists, who are mainly social workers or psychologists, work in teams. In addition to seminars, the teams have weekly supervision from MST therapists in the USA. The Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, holds the professional responsibility (Ogden, 1998). Schools of social work are not considered competent to teach MST, as one has to be a trained therapist to do that.

The role of stakeholders identifies the importance of considering not just the interaction of arenas of discourse and types of knowledge, but also the people who transfer learning. The overlap between stakeholders permits knowledge to be transferred. For example, a social worker transmits the knowledge originated in the agency-professional arena to service users, while an educator transmits knowledge originated in the professional arena to workers. The interaction of various stakeholders means that all are mutually important in developing valid knowledge for social workers. In multiprofessional settings, which are often the modern context for social work practice, learning transfer may also need to be undertaken across professional boundaries, involving a wider group of stakeholders, such as professional colleagues, paraprofessionals and volunteers, members of families or communities and users and carers.

Types of learning transfer that are most relevant to validation processes in a profession must integrate both action and structure. They do so by incorporating both the different processes within the organisation and structure of social work and the different interests and priorities among stakeholders. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning circle has relevance here. By following the four stages, the learner goes from concrete experiences

via observation of and reflection on the experiences to abstract conceptualisation of knowledge and then to active experimentation (Kolb, 1984:42). The experiential learning circle is a helpful device for working through and reflecting on personal experiences or life-historical knowledge. It is also a tool for becoming conscious of tacit knowledge, integrating practice and theory and becoming aware of new challenges and areas where new competence is needed (Askeland, 2000).

Macaulay (2001), like Kolb, suggests a number of factors that may facilitate transfer of learning. These include providing an initial context for transfer of learning by, for example, focusing on the learner with explicit attention to her way of learning and providing a safe environment in which learning may take place. The transfer process includes ensuring that initial learning is securely achieved and that the learner can see and understand the connections between the original learning and the new situation, enabling the learner to have practical experience in a structured and organised way of the old learning in the new situation and encouraging reflection on the experience. Thus, validation through learning transfer needs to be effectively situated within the social and political context of the stakeholders, and draw explicit links between different forms of knowledge, anchoring and integrating them in well-understood social practices. These social processes might include local community expectations dealing with the life-historical knowledge, agency practices dealing with professional knowledge and academic validation dealing with scientific knowledge.

We have so far considered the processes of knowledge creation, knowledge transfer and knowledge use by professionals in practice. Apprenticeship or situated models of learning integrate these three processes and give priority to interpersonal validation processes, rather than scientific, professional or academic validation processes. Situated learning is a concept created by Lave (1991) who observed learning through apprenticeship in an African setting. It is a participative learning model where the teaching takes place in real life surroundings outside the classroom, where all perspectives that influence the occupation will become visible, even the cultural, economic and political context. The advantages of such an approach are that distinctions between 'learning and doing, between social identity and knowledge, between education and occupation, between form and content' (Lave, 1991; 1997:143),

are broken down. Practice placements in social work education build on the apprenticeship model, as does supervision for professionals, which is meant to promote situated learning and is an example of learning transfer in relation to life-historical knowledge. This concept may be equally well applied in validation processes around professional and scientific knowledge. Thus, scientific knowledge is revalidated for use in professional settings by being resituated through agency guidance, professional education and team discussion. Professional knowledge is resituated, but less commonly, for use in scientific knowledge by being accumulated, aggregated and tested in an organised way.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the concept of validation processes in social work knowledge, emphasising validation as a social process of approval incorporating power relationships rather than as an end-state producing a hierarchy of knowledge. Social work is constructed in different social arenas. We have suggested that each arena will have different validation processes, which, in turn, validate different knowledges. Validating social work knowledge, therefore, involves processes of refinement and interpretation of knowledges between the arenas. This creates a process of transfer of learning between the arenas in which knowledges are resituated to be relevant to each arena. This takes place within an overall context in which knowledge in social work must permit both action within practice and the formation of structures of the social work profession. Using ideas about learning transfer, we have proposed a process of validation that focuses on situated learning, which incorporates a focus on application in real-life situations at different levels.

Why is this important? We want to emphasise five crucial issues. First, debates about knowledge in social work have tended to focus on validity as part of an attempt to create a hierarchy of knowledge. We have argued that this imposes existing power relations of different countries, social statuses and gender relations on the use of knowledge. It privileges scientific knowledge, which may be hard to apply, over life-historical and professional knowledge, which may be easier to use in practice. However, life-historical and professional knowledge requires reflective practice to become useful in a broader perspective and to prevent it from becoming judgemental. Also, life-historical

and professional knowledges may be more interdisciplinary and holistic than scientific knowledge. Life-historical and professional knowledge is important for actions and activities in social work, as it is a basis for developing attitudes and skills.

Second, a focus on validation as a social process in which knowledges are resituated as relevant to different arenas within social work discourse permits us to move away from hierarchical knowledge relations. We may substitute a more empowering validation process, which hears different voices in different arenas. Otherwise, oppressed people's life-historical knowledge goes unrecognised by social work. Since evidence-based knowledge lags behind life-historical and professional knowledges, these are important in keeping practice knowledge up-to-date and relevant in a constantly changing world. Third, since valid knowledge is highly contextual, rather than search for guidelines on valid knowledge, it is important to open up access to different knowledges that are accessible through cross-national exchanges. This permits inspiration from alternative and external knowledge bases, which may broaden practitioners' perspectives. Fourth, by using understanding about the transfer of learning, we can identify processes of validation that resituate knowledge in practically useable ways in different arenas, rather than using scientific forms of communication or other means of knowledge transfer that incorporate the power relations that we are seeking to displace. Finally, if a hierarchy of knowledge no longer exists, this needs to influence the content and the teaching methods of social work education.

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Note:

1. RAE is a system for evaluating research output and awarding funding to institutions accordingly.