

Research and Social Work Science

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Introducing remark: „Research into practice knowledge“? – yes, but not without social work science!

That’s my thesis in short, I hope my following arguments will be conclusive for you. In the following I’ll make a connection between research, profession and social work science.

Practice knowledge – but why research?

Why is it not enough for experienced social workers to pass on their practice knowledge and their own know-how to the next generation, like a craftsman to his apprentice? However, Alice Salomon has already made us aware of the fact that social work is only able to meet the great responsibility it has for its addressees with the help of theory. In the title above I sense some subtextual disappointment about the “theories”: Worldwide a science base for social work is requested and social workers who want to make use of it get lost in the “maze of theories” and refrain from theory-use (Olson Ackerman). Should we hope that somebody will come who knows practice and so is able to generate tailored theories ready to practice? The organizers of this conference apparently set their hope on research. This seems at first glance to be the right way, but: Who asks the questions to be answered, and which are the relevant questions?

SWS as a systematic and reflected way to ask questions and answering them

“As any researcher knows, the way the question is asked defines and limits the response range; so by leaving this research in the hands of non-social workers, we have not only been left with some useless data, but we have passively colluded in allowing our questions and concerns to be redefined and altered to meet the needs of those who know nothing about current (...) social work practice”. (Mac Guire 2002, 9)

He is quite right in saying that the posing of questions must come from social work issues, because an alienated research redefines its agenda and is of no use. But: How do the questions arise? And how to put them in a way that the addressee’s claim to responsible help meets a well-founded and legitimized reaction? For questions to be able to be asked in a non-preconceived and systematic way, the path of science must be taken.

An example from research

Good marks for social work

A survey on school social work has shown that nearly 90 % of the pupils and teachers are satisfied with the services offered in Munich. School social work services are to be found at 65 Munich schools. The offer includes homework support, lunch, mediation training, leisure activities and individual coaching. The best marks were given by the 2,500 interviewees in particular for counselling and talks, support in job training as well as class projects and the function of school socialwork as the link between pupils and teachers. In the current school year school social work is to be extended at three schools and to be newly introduced at six further schools."

The example illustrates several things: It brings a good message, for it documents that the addressees of social workers give good marks. It describes the complex task field. And it demonstrates that it is not about practice, but about the promise to be able to moderate a problem situation. A very interesting point is how successful procedures are to be distinguished from unsuccessful ones.

The "theory" is not merely meant to make the social worker's life easier, but rather to achieve a goal for the addressees. What lies behind their satisfaction, are the social workers merely good guys? Or do they have an approved programme for systematic work to accomplish a goal beyond the satisfaction, f. e. in this case to get a school-leaving qualification and to manage the passage to a job.

Social Work as a job or a profession?

Is Social Work merely a job or it is a profession? Professions are different from jobs in not only making use of scientific knowledge; an electrician f. e. make use of physics, but they need not have read physics at university. A profession is always referred to a science. Science does not (only) make available knowledge and recipes for practice, but above all else it means a systematic and controlled way for developing theoretical models and a reflected way of dealing with epistemological and legitimation problems in "knowledge production".

Theories as "truth machines"

A theory is a "truth machine", as I tried to explain at the Ostrava conference two weeks ago, which determines the practitioner's action and can have fatal and disastrous consequences. If we use models which don't work, then the client is the one who gets the dirty.

Understanding complex and unforeseeable situations

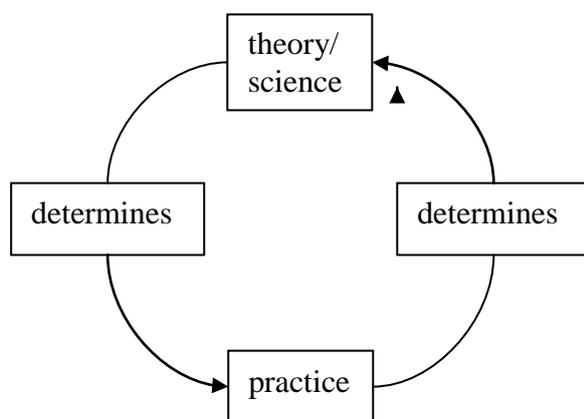
And much more important: dealing with science provides the ability of remaining capable of acting when confronted with complex, unknown and unforeseeable situations, a "generative grammar" for new situations which require new processes of understanding every time and for which rigid rules make no sense.

Innovation

And it provides the ability to find completely novel and innovative solutions for novel problems both on a theoretical level and a practical level. The above quoted school social work is a good example: fifteen years ago, nobody talked about it, but now violence and school dropouts are considered a problem field relevant to society. And social workers have to cope with it by inventing viable approaches to describing, explaining and changing the problem situation.

Social work science as a crossdisciplinary practice science

This innovation must be assisted by academics who work in a cyclic relationship between theory/science and practice in the construction of scientific foundations:



Graph 1: The cyclic relationship between Theory/science and practice

The possible way out may be presented by a systematic discourse on the construction of *a science relevant for problems of acting within social work* in practice. Thus a social work science as a crossdisciplinary practice science is proposed. This means that in constructing a science composed of theories relevant to action problems we have to take into account the two following aspects:

- (a) You only see what you know! - what you are capable of recognizing in social work practice is determined by your theoretical scope.
- (b) Practice does not care at all about scientific disciplines! Theories must learn from practice, theoretical concepts must be adapted to action problems. By what theory pattern can the practice of social work be understood? A better theory for social work is probably a comprehensive, crossdisciplinary one: all relevant approaches should be integrated for helping effectively and with lasting results.

Terminological pitfalls: “knowledge” and “theories”

Theories are contradictory and mutually exclusive. A specific line of argument in terms of “knowledge” pretends as if this were not the case. Resp. it fakes a nonexistent objectiveness that betrays us into simply taking what seems to be useful.

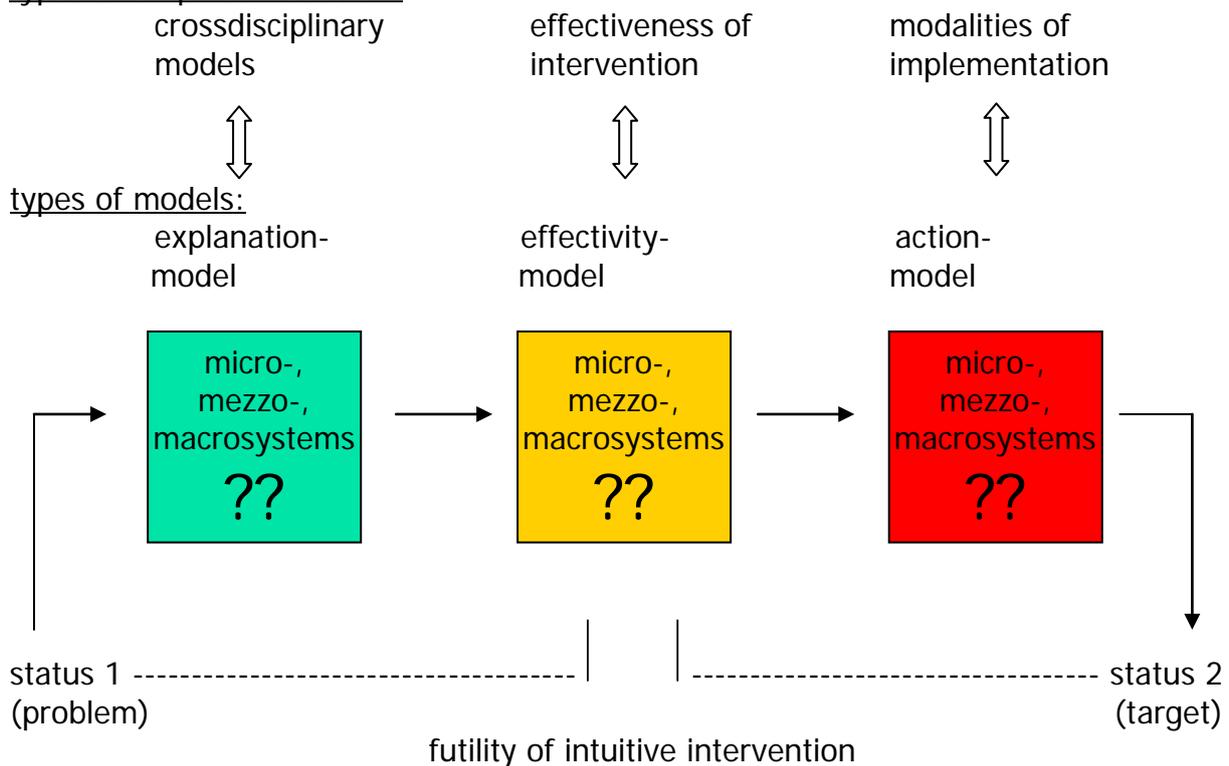
“Theories” (from different sciences) are not sufficient for social work, because either you get lost in the theoretical maze or out of a myriad of competing mutually exclusive approaches (Payne!) you have to select the “good” one.

Terminological pitfalls: “practice knowledge” and “competences” – the methodological black box

When we talk about “practice knowledge” or “competences” we construct a methodological black box, because it misleads us into overlooking that it is a concern of research to discover evidence-based good practice models. The notion that a professional social worker simply applies (science-based) recipes or rules is problematical, because it cannot meet the requirements of the complexity of practice. Furthermore, the danger is imminent that the problems are adapted to the methods instead of (the way it should be) methods that are adapted to problems.

Diversion via theory models

types of empirical research:



Graph 2: the diversion via theory models

A direct intuitive intervention is futile. We need conceptualization on the level of explanation models (problem description and “causes”); these must be supplemented by effect models (how to change problematical situations? – instead of believing in “everything works” an empirically validated

understanding of “what works?”) and by action models (how to transform the effect model into actions?). This model building must be done for the micro–(individuals and families), mezzo–(institutions and regional environment) and macrosystems (society). Corresponding research activities are crossdisciplinary explanation model building, the investigation of conditions of changing and of the significant criteria in the operative performance (What kind of difference makes the difference?)

That means that a practitioner understands his practice and programmes his decision making by linking to the combination of explanation–, effectivity– and action–models.

One can speak about everything, but not in 15 min.

I cannot dwell here on
the subject matter of social work science,
about the relation of science and practice
the “boundarylessness” of social work

Let me only give two hints:

Some argue that a social work science is impossible since the targets of social work are regulated by society. That’s true, but the social problems exist, whether they are registered by society or not.

And: Science must not be subjugated to practice.

Outlook

In Nov. 2006 the German Society of Social Work organized a conference on research. The focus of many of the 64 projects presented was on micro–level explanation models carried out with qualitative methods. Let me make a comment somewhat ironically: it’s not difficult to conduct some interviews or to give some people a question paper and to see what the result is. Such kind of “research lite” is of limited value, because important questions are excluded.