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Towards a practical and generalizable model for bridging the gap between NPM and Social Work at the level of local government.

This project aims to co-develop a highly generalizable approach to establishing local Quality Management in Social Work . This new type of approach is to be used at the municipality level (local government) and must be characterized by context sensitivity in respect to the existing organizational structures as well as in respect to important features of social work practice (complexity, reflexivity, the relational aspect, the value of inclusion in the sense of the Salamanca Treaty and the importance of context-awareness in general).

The main task for such a new type of approach is to balance out or synthesize what is most often described as a dichotomous conflict between NPM and the welfare professions. Social Workers at the street level experience Social Work and NPM as incommensurable conflicting rationalities and these tension-experiences are hard to live with or accommodate in the existing professionalism of the social workers as well in work culture at team- and organizational network levels in the Municipalities.

In the literature there are ready-made Social Work discourses, that offer themselves as mediators between NPM (or parts of it) and Social Work . Peter Sommerfeld, Hans-Uwe Otto, Edgar Marthinsen, Daniel Gredig, Holger Ziegler and several others have contributed in this respect, but the contributions tend to be limited in scope (drawing on one or perhaps two disciplines rather than being truly cross-disciplinary), which will create problems of application and use in the municipalities. From a Municipality point of view it seems that a truly cross-disciplinary and co-operative approach (synthesizing across the disciplines and practicalities embedded in every Municipality fx. leadership, governance, public administration, sociology, organization and social work) is a more likely and operational choice compared to the instrumentalism of mono-disciplinary theoretic constructs. The latter will not to the same extent address and constructively transform the exiting professionalisms and thus dissolve or displace the experienced tensions for the sake of re-motivation and a renewed professional identity, that will better accommodate the demand to integrate current social policy (ex. more systematic documentation of output or different kinds of accountability).

In my presentation I will sketch some preliminary theoretical features of such a highly generalizable

approach for developing local Quality Management in Social Work at the municipality level.

My point of departure and frame of reference is methodological relationism (theoretical positions that seek to transcend all dichotomies at the axiomatic level). This point of departure allows for a rejection for the all too often made claim in the community of researchers, that NPM and the welfare professions are dichotomous and conflicting phenomena. From my theoretical point of departure there is no clash between NPM and Social Work. On the contrary they can be conceptualized as interdependent clusters of processes on the same historically changing tension-balance. I will present one schematic model of this kind of radical relational re-conceptualization drawing on Norbert Elias, Bruno Latour and Bourdieu. Re-conceptualized in this way the tension-balance between NPM and SW – at the local level – is open to intentional development and manipulation. I will advance my re-conceptualization by drawing on yet another methodological relationism, namely Yrjö Engeströms Developmental Work Research (DWR) which is a particular branch of CHAT (Cultural Historical Activity Theory). DWR offers a set of developmental techniques that promise to transform what by illusion seems to be a dichotomous tension that has trapped the street level professionals in a dichotomous deadlock. The tendency to end up in this kind of deadlock is itself a historical and cultural phenomena which is quite intricate and build in to every westerners perception, according to Latour and Elias. But – in theory – this deadlock seems transcendable at the individual level using DWR developmental methods and certain kinds of flow-architectural tooling (or means of orientation), that are both reflexive (thus pro SW) and open to governance and management (pro NPM). Ideally re-tooling the social sector in the municipalities and simultaneously establishing Quality Management of SW in this way will remove or dissolve the dichotomous and frozen view on the relation between NPM and SW which prevail in the professional identities of social workers as well as with some management practitioners in the municipalities. In fact – when re-conceptualized in this way – it becomes clear that state-management of social work needs to undergo drastic changes at the local level to aptly govern social work. Thus the pressure to develop is reversed by the re-conceptualization in comparison to the hegemonic narratives of NPM, which will point the finger exclusively at SW. If the re-conceptualization is allowed to shift the balance in the distribution of the developmental responsibilities between NPM and SW, then it opens a two way street for a co-configuration process in the individual municipalities where both parties (NPM-practitioners and social workers) participate and undergo changes (synthesis) in the pursue of a new local Quality Management model.

The above constitutes bits and pieces of theory and developmental practices that comes together as a highly generalizable approach to developing local Quality Management in Social Work. But in practical terms it requires the conduction of a multi-dimensional co-configuration and practice-experiment for every Municipality out there. I would like to have named this approach 'Mode 2,

Quality Management', but to make a distinction between mode 1 and 2 is not allowed in the radical versions of methodological relationism used here. These positions should rather be understood as synthesis between Mode 1 and 2 resulting in a third quality. It may seem more justified to call it 'Mode 3, Quality Management' despite the pretentious and perhaps and overly dramatized ring to it. At least it is neither Mode 1 nor Mode 2 and methodological relationism does constitute a third rationality or a third world well hidden behind a veil of dichotomous thinking and modeling (also in our field of research). It is an important feature that Mode 1 is naturally included in this approach and in the Quality Management resulting from it – how else are we going to qualify SW if Mode 1 and generalizable knowledge is disqualified from the beginning?