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GLOBALIZING SOCIAL WORK: COMMON BASIS AND POSITION

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ABSTRACT

Globalizing Social Work: Common Basis and Position

As a result of the accelerating globalization process and its influence on social developments, social policy and social work, there is a growing awareness that social work is an international profession, and that social workers all around the world are confronted with comparable developments, seeking the same type of solutions, using similar forms of intervention, and playing a similar role in society. The aim of this article is to stimulate international awareness within social policy, social work and social work education, by focusing on the common basis of the profession, and discussing the position of social work from an international point of view.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, managerialism, marketization, body of knowledge, globalization, international social work, history of social work

SAMENVATTING

Internationalisering van sociaal werk: gemeenschappelijke basis en positie
Als gevolg van het voortschrijdende globaliseringsproces en de invloed ervan op sociale ontwikkelingen, sociaal beleid en sociaal werk, groeit de laatste jaren het bewustzijn van het internationale karakter van het beroep. Sociaal werkers over de gehele wereld worden steeds vaker geconfronteerd met vergelijkbare ontwikkelingen, zoeken dezelfde soort oplossingen, gebruiken vergelijkbare vormen van interventie, en spelen een zelfde rol in de samenleving. Doel van dit artikel is het stimuleren van internationale bewustwording in het sociaal werk, de opleidingen en de sociale beleidssector door te laten zien dat het sociaal werk in de wereld een gemeenschappelijke basis heeft en in een vergelijkbare positie verkeert.

TREFWOORDEN

neoliberalisme, managementisme, marktwerking, kennisbestand, globalisering, internationaal sociaal werk, geschiedenis van sociaal werk

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This article is based on the presentation of my book *Core Social Work, International Theory, Values and Practice* published in 2012 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers in London (UK) and Philadelphia (USA). The presentation was held at the conference "Internationalization in Social Work Education" at NHL University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, on 22 March, 2012. The figures in this article, as well as parts of the text, are taken from my book. The drawings (figures 1 and 4) are by Henny Feijer.

INTRODUCTION

The modern profession of social work, as it is known and practised in many countries today, has its origins in the second half of the nineteenth century when, amidst the industrial revolution, social workers began to organize themselves and established the first schools of social work.

In the twentieth century, social work became a worldwide profession – just like nursing, medicine and teaching – organized and practised within the framework of the nation state. The national

framework has always had a strong impact on social workers and social institutions, and on the space that workers have to carry out their work according to professional values and standards. Because the process of globalization is having a standardizing influence on social conditions and the social policy of the nation state, more similarity in the conditions for social work can be expected in the near future (Penna, Paylor & Washington, 2000).

Although many practitioners and teachers in the field of social work still consider their profession to be related to culture and bound to language (as far as it occurs to them), there is a growing awareness that social work is an international profession, and that social workers all around the world are confronted with comparable developments, seeking the same type of solutions, using similar forms of intervention, and playing a similar role in society.

In my career as a lecturer, social worker and international project manager I have often experienced, and in various situations, how an international approach "helps" people to gain a better perspective on what is taken for granted "at home", in their own environment. Cooperation and confrontation with colleagues and conditions elsewhere can stimulate an awareness of the national-cultural context in which people live, study and work. It also enables critical reflection on the way people cope with social developments, social problems, inequality, and participation in their own countries ("Think global, act local").

The aim of this article is to stimulate international awareness within social work and social work education, by focusing on the common basis of the profession, and discussing the position of social work from an international point of view. The current position of social work in the world is a difficult one, because it is strongly influenced by the neoliberal ideology connected with the current stage of the globalization process.

After an introduction to the international approach, I will discuss the common base and shared aspects of the profession. In the last part of the article, I will analyse the position of social work today, resulting in some conclusions and recommendations.

INTERNATIONAL APPROACH

Mel Gray and Stephen Webb, researchers from Australia who edited major reference works for social work (see Blok, 2012b), developed an (what I call) "inclusive global view" on social work that I consider fruitful and workable.

This global view (Gray & Webb, 2010) includes the diversity of (national) cultures and approaches.

> While (the) emerging diversity of approaches to social work appears quite striking, there continues to be something of a "mainstream" even though it is navigated by fewer than before. Internationally, social work has grown in stature and influence, as well as making important contributions to the social sciences … because it explicitly attempts to cut across diverse social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. Within the contemporary situation, social work also addresses many of the pressing problems facing people across the globe. (p. xxiii)

Social work has evolved considerably, both as a field of professional practice and an academic discipline since the late nineteenth century. "In addition, social work has had to confront new challenges from changing policy agendas, transitions in welfare, the shift of interest towards service-user involvement, the rise of evidence-based practice, the advent of globalization and neoliberal politics, and the "professionalization" of frontline practice by a range of risk performance and regulatory regimes" (Gray, Midgley & Webb, 2012, p. 2). Social work had done this "while retaining a core set of values focusing on social justice, anti-oppressive practice, and the ethics of recognition" (Gray *et al.,* 2012, p. 2).

The "core set of values" that the authors refer to, is part of many professional documents, such as the international Statement of Ethical Principles adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW & IASSW, 2004a), the Code of Ethics of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2012, pp. 12–13), and the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers in the USA (NASW, 2008).

In general, the adjective "core" to (in this case) "social work values" is used to signify the basic or essential character of a thing. It is also used for other aspects of social work. The Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards refers to "core social work theory and practice" (AASW, 2012, p. 23), "core social work skills"' (p. 36) and "core social work values and principles" (p. 58) that have to be taught, learned, and developed. Many universities in the USA offer basic knowledge and essential skills in what they call "Core Social Work Courses" (see for example the Central Connecticut State University, 2012).

Similarly, the book where this article is based on, is entitled *Core Social Work* because it discusses basic, common aspects of social work as an (international) profession, regardless of the national context in which social workers are organized and functioning.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Workers, teachers, policy makers and researchers in the field of social work are organized at national and international levels. The biggest, most influential international organizations are:

- The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW);
- The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW);
- The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW).

The IFSW is a federation of social work associations from over 90 countries, representing 750,000 professional social workers. The IASSW speaks on behalf of 2,000 schools of social work and 500,000 students. The ICSW represents tens of thousands of organisations around the world that are actively involved in programmes to promote social welfare, social development and social justice (IFSW, IASSW & ICSW, 2012, p. 2). For further reading on these organizations, please refer to Healy and Hall (2009).

Of the many international social work journals and magazines – both in print and online – I mention the *European Journal of Social Work*, the *Community Development Journal*, the *International Online Journal Social Work & Society* with the related *SW&S Newsmagazine*, the *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*, *International Social Work*, and the *New Social Worker Online*. The internet also contains many data banks and portals for social work, such as the SWAN: the *Social Access Network*. Incidentally, the *Social Work Café* provides a nice opportunity to meet and chat with colleagues and students.

Numerous books on social work have been published, many in the English language. There is also the long-established, *Encyclopaedia of Social Work*. The 20th edition of the Encyclopaedia was published in 2008 (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008).

Most of what is mentioned here is American or British in origin. This is due to the historical dominance of the USA and the UK in the theory and methods of social work. This is also

reflected in the professional terminology used by social workers all over the world, which is full of English words and terms, such as casework, caseload, intake, community work, empowerment, counselling, and remedial teaching.

INTERNATIONAL DEFINITION

Most readers of this journal will be familiar with the international definition of social work, which is promoted by the IFSW and the IASSW. This definition provides a brief, generalized description of what social workers do, how they do it, and why they do it.

The definition is as follows:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.
> By utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. The principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW, 2000, p. 1)

On the basis of this definition, IFSW and IASSW also formulated and published global ethical standards and values (IFSW & IASSW, 2004a), global standards for education and training, and joint elements of a global, professional body of knowledge (IFSW & IASSW, 2004b).

BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

Like all other professions, social work has a *body of knowledge*. The term body of knowledge is used to represent the complete set of concepts, terms and activities that make up a professional domain, as defined by the relevant professional association" (Wikipedia, 2012).

Before I discuss its body of knowledge, I would like to emphasize the normative nature of social work, which represents an important aspect of the profession. After all, social workers are confronted directly with the consequences of the way people interact as well as with their underlying values and standards, and those of the other actors involved.

Its normative nature has always been characteristic of social work. As the IFSW explains:

> Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Since its beginning over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. (IFSW, 2000, p. 1)

The drawing illustrates the mixed nature of social work activities: instrumental (methods and techniques) on the one hand; normative (interpretation, objectives, approach) on the other. Figure 1 with a drawing of Henny Feijer shows the social worker with her head in the clouds (her principles and ideals) her toolbox at hand (her methods), helping people to fit into society, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, and finding solutions to social problems.

Reasoning from this description, and based on the international definition of social work, the education of social workers – regardless its embedding in or outside universities – is *professional* education, that includes philosophy (ethics), theory (sociology, psychology, history, policy- and organization) and research, as well as practical-, personal-, and methodical training. According to the IFSW (2000), social work's body of knowledge can be described as an interrelated system of values, theory, and practice which enables people to enhance their well-being and improve the social environment in which they live.

Concerning the theoretical part of education, social workers need to be familiar with a sociological, psychological, developmental-historical and organizational view on reality, but also with theories and concepts that can be applied in professional practice (so called *middle range theories,* bridging the gap between empirical observation and broad, often abstract and untestable, general theories).

As a result of many years of experience, the current body of knowledge of social work includes in any case the following well-known, widespread theories of proven applied value, namely:

- Planned Change Theory
- Motivation Theories

Figure 1: Social work as a normative and technical profession

- Ecological Systems Theory
- Communicative Action Theory

Each of these theories is related to one or more elements in the definition of social work. To illustrate this, I will closely follow the IFSW's explanation of the definition (IFSW, 2000).

Planned Change Theory

According to the IFSW, "professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve" (IFSW, 2000, p. 1). When development stagnates, or when change is hard to achieve, people can find themselves in difficult or problematic situations. In such cases, the support of a social worker can make the difference. This is why knowing about the processes of development and change, as well as being able to encourage and support them, is an important part of the social worker's expertise.

The *Planned Change Theory*, with various authors since the 1950s, is a well-known source that provides social workers with tools for planning and steering the change processes on various levels (Lewin, 1951; Lippitt, Watson & Westley, 1958; Bennis, Benne, Chin & Corey, 1985).

Motivation Theories

Social work is based on humanitarian and democratic ideals, as well as on people's willingness and ability to change. For these reasons, social workers are keen to accommodate needs and develop human potential. The usefulness of *Motivation Theories*, which is based on humanist psychology, is therefore obvious in social work. The hierarchy of needs by Abraham Maslow, depicted in the form of a pyramid, is the best-known of these theories and often cited and used in social work, as well as in other professions that deal with human motivation and development (Maslow, 1943, 1987).

Ecological Systems Theory

According to the IFSW, the support and assistance provided through social work is both object-oriented (problem-solving and providing means for realization) and subject-oriented (empowering clients to act). The social worker must also target any third parties who may be influencing the client insofar as they form part of the problem and/or the solution. To achieve this, the social worker must be able to operate at a range of levels with a variety of people, completing different tasks, and playing different roles as the situation requires.

The *Ecological Systems Theory* of Uri Bronfenbrenner, and the many variations on it that exist, offers a theoretical framework and instruments to analyse and cope with interaction and mutuality between individuals and their environment on the micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979,1994).

Communicative Action Theory

In many situations, with all sorts of people, the social worker must be aware of differing values and standards, inequalities between people and groups and conflicting interests. The social worker must be able to analyse the actions and positions of the persons, groups, and organizations involved, so that he can select and implement an appropriate and effective way of working toward solutions.

The *Communicative Action Theory* of Jürgen Habermas has proven helpful in situations where social workers are required to interact with unequal individuals, groups and organizations in society. Community workers and mediating workers in particular benefit from Habermas' distinction between *System World* and *Life World*, and his concept of achieving mutual understanding on goals and action, based on truth, rightness and sincerity (Habermas, 1981; Houston, 2009).

Holistic approach

The IFSW does not only refer to these kinds of behaviour- and system theories, but also to the *universal holistic focus* of social work that resides in the complex interaction between clients and their social environment. "Change-oriented interventions by a social worker can only be effective if problems are analysed and handled in their mutual dependency and with regard to their specific nature" (IFSW, 2000, p. 1).

Holism and *holistic* originate from the Greek word *holon*, meaning whole, entirety, or completeness. Holism is a way of thinking in which the whole is seen as a separate entity, consisting of constituent parts (or components) but not as the sum of them. The constituent parts affect and impact on each other and in so doing, create an unique, separate entity.

Ramsay (1999) confirms the holistic focus of social work on the interaction between the individual and the social environment. According to the author, this has been a central element in social work's body of knowledge, and this has placed it at the head of the social sciences for many years.

> The recognition by social work pioneers of complex person-in-environment systems and their intuitive sense of a holistic, deep ecological worldview shows them to be conceptual thinkers well ahead of their time. The value of their early insights has had to wait for an acknowledged science paradigm to emerge and receive public acceptance. (Ramsay, 1999, pp. 69–86)

Each of the four applied theories represents a specific scientific approach of human behaviour and social systems. As a whole, they cover a wide scope of analysis and action, facilitating a holistic approach. These theories are not new, but they are existing ones, reflecting the state of the art in social work.

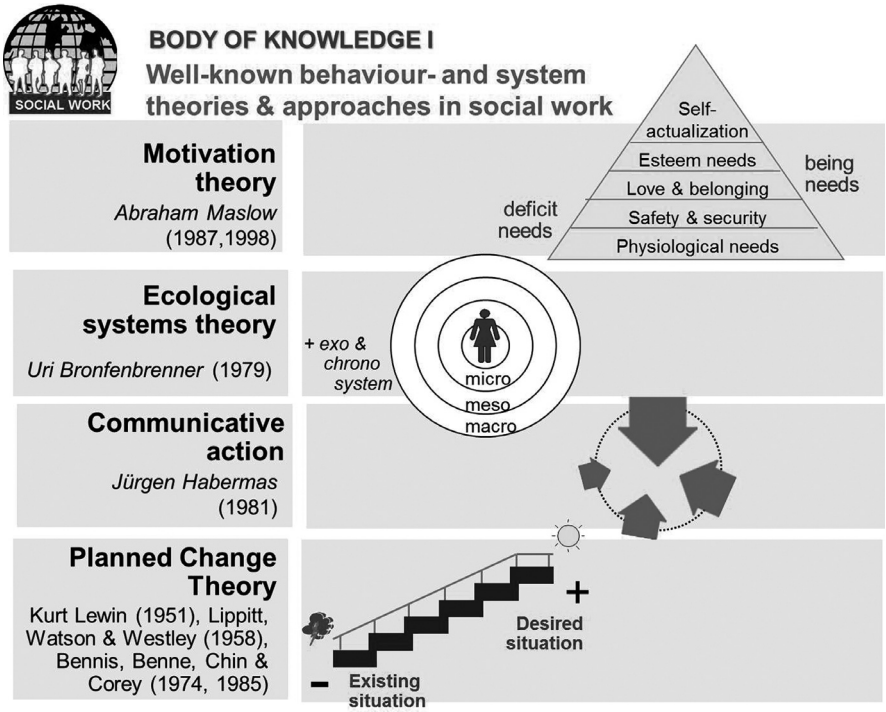

Figure 2: An overview of four well-known and widespread theories of proven value for social work

Of course, besides the theories mentioned, many others are used in social work, such as the anti-oppressive, radical, educational, and gender-specific ones. Most of them, however, are less well known or have a narrower field of applicability because of their context-specific, premature or otherwise limited character.

Although it is hard to predict, new, promising approaches seem to be the *constructive* and *integrative* ones, such as *Constructive social work* of Parton and O'Byrne (2000) and integrative theories like those of Dutch social work author Gerard Donkers (2010) and Irish author Mark Garavan (2012).

THE DUAL NATURE OF SOCIAL WORK

Mel Gray and Stephen Webb, editors of the four-volume work *International Social Work* (2010) searched for "the level of integration on which the different texts unfold" (Gray & Webb, p. xxvii) when identifying the nature and role of social work, and the essential logic of the profession.

One of their findings is "that the essential rationality of modern social work is ambivalently configured through (the) twin logics of regulation and security, which work in and through each other" (Gray & Webb, p. xxxi). *Regulation* is a mode of ordering, "achieved by legal rules, procedures, policy requirements and regulatory mandates that are likely to be backed by behavioral sanctions and standards" (Gray & Webb, p. xxix). *Security* "includes safety, vulnerability, coping strategies, social support, and care and protection" (Gray & Webb, p. xxx). These logics sound familiar, because they mirror Max Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality and substantive rationality.

In my opinion, there have always been two sides to social work and there still are. On the one hand it involves helping people, and on the other hand it involves supporting the established social order, even if this is unjust in some way. The social worker provides support to needy and vulnerable members of society, and in so doing helps to change these people and (further) integrate them into the established order of social relations. The one cannot be separated from the other.

The key task of social workers is to support people who, for whatever reason, are unable to meet their own basic and secondary needs and participate fully in social life. Social workers, social services and social institutions are in my opinion the hallmarks of a civilized society in which human rights, social justice and democracy are conceived of as essential values and standards. Social work contributes to a better quality of life for all citizens, to social cohesion and to solidarity, while simultaneously supporting society's established order. This *dual function* of social work, does not have to be a dilemma for social workers, provided the established social order is democratic, based on freedom of speech and organization, an independent judicial system, the separation of political and judicial powers, and respect for human rights. In addition, I like to emphasize that social work must also be (able to) carried out properly and according to professional standards and definitions.

THE POSITION OF SOCIAL WORK IN SOCIETY

Professional social work, with its dual function of regulation (read: control) and security (read: emancipation) is part of the social infrastructure of the nation state, and as such is an important instrument for social policy of public- and institutional authorities.

In the modern policy terms of the European Union, every society has a threefold infrastructure: an *economic infrastructure* (factories, offices, supermarkets, institutions, etc.), an *environmental-physical infrastructure* (roads, railways, canals, communication facilities, buildings, etc.) and a *social infrastructure* defined as: "the whole of organizations, services and provisions offering individual citizens in their own environment the possibilities to participate in society" (Kamer der Staten Generaal, 1999, p. 2, translation by author).

The social infrastructure, where social work institutions are part of, is directed and coordinated by its main financer, the government, according to goals, priorities, and allocation of means formulated in its *social policy*. Figure 3 provides a visual summary.

Since 1997, the approach of social policy (dominated by economic policy and a top-down approach) in Europe and its member states have come under scientific scrutiny. A new approach was required, and we are now moving towards a modern, more participative approach based on the concept of *social quality*.

Social quality is defined as: "the extent to which people are able to participate in the social and economic life, under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacity and individual potential" (Beck, Van der Maessen & Walker, 2008, quoted by Herrmann & Van der Maesen, 2008, p. 7).

The objective of social policy is to improve and maintain the *social quality of life* for all citizens in society. *Social Work policy* is specific policy toward social (work) institutions and their role in the social infrastructure. The urgency, necessity, and success of social policies can be measured using the four indicators of social quality: *socio-economic security*, *social cohesion*, *social inclusion*, and *social empowerment*.

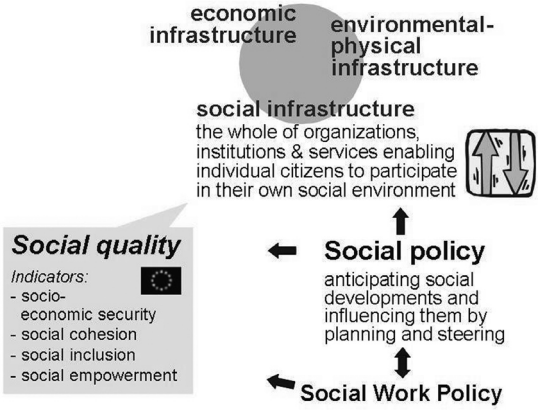

Figure 3: The place and functions of social policy and social work in society

NEOLIBERALISM

The crises of the welfare state that occurred during the 1980s and the collapse of communism at the end of that decade, mark a huge societal shift, especially in Western countries. The era of the Cold War, emancipation, democratization, youth culture, labour and civil rights, neo-Marxism, the anti-war movement, and alternative lifestyles evolved into an era of neoliberalism, neocapitalism, civil society, the rise of China and India, the digital revolution, mobility, terrorism, globalization, cultural mixing, spiritualism, and ecology.

According to John Harris (2012) *neoliberalism* is characterized by *marketization* (markets are efficient and effective and should be introduced in as many contexts as possible), *consumerization* (individuals should be responsible for themselves and run their own lives as far as possible) and *managerialization* (services in the public and voluntary sectors should be modelled on management knowledge and techniques drawn from the private business sector).

Neoliberal social policy fitted into the new societal climate from the 1990s. In a neoliberal society, the government withdraws by privatizing public institutions and services and/or subjecting them

to market mechanisms and commercial management. In doing this, the government limits its own responsibilities to (co)financing, facilitation, and monitoring.

In response to the crisis of the welfare state of the 1980s, many governments followed the example of the British government under the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, implementing a neoliberal policy for the social infrastructure. The "scourge of the market" was used to discipline social institutions and make them more cost efficient and cooperative.

For more information on the effects of neoliberal social policy and its impact on social work, I would like to refer to John Harris' book *The Social Work Business* (Harris, 2003). I will focus here on some aspects and solutions in the Netherlands. For readers who want to know more about the Dutch situation, I refer to my article *Market, Management and Profession - Social Business in the Polder* (Blok, 2004).

The Dutch example

In the 1980s, the government of the Netherlands implemented six long-term operations to manage the Welfare State and its increasing costs (Van den Gevel & Van de Goor, 1989, pp. 65–71, translation by author).These so called *major operations* were:

1. Reconsidering public services: no longer providing care and services from infancy to death. The emphasis is on individual responsibility for citizens.
2. Decentralizing government: more control and funding from the national level redistributed at the provincial and local levels.
3. Privatizing public services, introducing market mechanisms into non-profit institutions, and shifting from input- to output-financing in health care, social care, and education.
4. Deregulating: reducing the amount of legislation and regulation, and placing more responsibility on citizens and private initiatives.
5. Reorganizing national government, resulting in a smaller, more efficient political system.
6. Reducing the number of civil servants.

Looking back, this long-term policy resulted in a range of positive and negative effects for education, health care and social care that can still be discerned today (for an instructive evaluation

by Andries Baart, please see: Blok, 2012a, pp. 167–169). Public and social institutions were forced into mergers and upgrades (based on the idea that larger should be more cost effective). Managers, mainly from outside the profession(s), set economic goals, introduced market mechanisms, and increased productivity. The government changed the system of subsidies into output financing that is based on so-called "hard" production figures and facts.

Harrie Kunneman, a Dutch philosopher, criticizes the effects of this neoliberal social policy, "there are more checks and control at the meso- and micro-levels than ever before. Under cover of a neoliberal, market and management-oriented word game, project planning and process controls are practised vigorously. Social work offers a clear illustration of this development" (Kunneman, 1996, p. 107, translation by author). The ideological focus shifted from solidarity to autonomy and self-management. "This did not happen without consequences on professionalism in special institutions. Professionals in the social sector are expected to be technically competent with effective methods of practice, to ensure that the agreed output is achieved, the financier/customer is satisfied, and the subsidy continued" (Kunneman, p. 107, translation by author).

When a business approach comes to predominate in an organization, managers gain a strong influence over professional workers. This negatively affects working conditions, service provision, and output. This phenomenon is referred to as *managerialism*.

The Dutch author Taco Brandsen (1998, pp. 5–6, translation by author) defines managerialism as "a form of management …. focused on economically defined efficiency and effectiveness and outcome-directed control …. combined with ample power for managers to shift standards. This structure enables the managers to limit the powers of other professionals and to centralize control and authority within the organization."

Brandsen considers managerialism to be a form of neo-Taylorism (Taylor invented the conveyor belt for the Ford company), meaning central regulation of work processes of a mechanical character, in which the manager thinks and the employees follow.

In the view of Kunneman, managerialism leads to a technical concept of professionalism that jeopardizes the nature and significance of the social professions. For this reason, Kunneman argues that normative concepts should be revitalized and re-introduced into social professions.

Figure 4 provides an image of the position of the social professional.

Figure 4: The social worker as marionette of market mechanisms and managerialization

Endangered social institutions

As in other Western countries, twenty years of neoliberalism and the "discipline of the market" resulted in a new class of institutional managers in the Netherlands. They surrounded themselves with a new bureaucracy of bookkeepers, public relations officers, system managers, and process controllers. Implementing the dominant notion of efficiency, the managers limited the scope of action for professional workers and saddled them with a range of new administrative duties. This autocratic, newly bureaucratic method of organization is justified with trendy neoliberal technocratic arguments, characterized as the "discourse of social technology"(Reverda, 2012, p. 89) far removed from the basic tasks of social work and social institutions.

The expansion of bureaucratic managerialism in the Netherlands became a cause of public and political dissatisfaction and stimulated calls for more "blue on the streets" (meaning police officers), more "white at the bedside" (more nurses), more contact hours with teachers, and more helping hands in elderly homes. The Dutch parliament set the *Balkenende Standard* for managers of public and non-profit institutions. The name "Balkenende" came from the name of the former prime minister, whose annual salary (approx. €190,000) was taken as the upper limit for managers of public and non-profit institutions in the Netherlands.

Anno 2012, the Dutch parliament is considering measures to enforce the Balkenende standard, because moral appeals to managers and internal "codes of conduct" have not been effective. One scandal after the other involving incompetence, self-enrichment or corruption has undermined people's trust in vital social, educational and public institutions. The Dutch parliament was holding a parliamentary enquiry into housing corporations responsible for building and maintaining housing for low-income groups with public money. Hospitals and institutions of secondary and higher education have also been the subject of successive scandals. Market mechanisms introduced into health care have proved counter-productive, pushing up spending and increasing bureaucracy (Tonkens, 2012).

Many citizens, particularly those who are vulnerable or marginalized, are paying the price for this abuse, and for the labyrinthine functioning of vital social services and institutions. In such instances, people become isolated, forgotten, and are left to their fate, while even the provision of elementary services in family care, elderly care, and care for the disabled (such as washing oneself, toileting, walking outside, and transport) is limited.

A DEMOCRATIC WAY OUT

In social work, health care, and education, the balance between management and executive levels, costs and quality, efficiency and effectiveness, has been upset. At stake are the viability and continued existence of meaningful professional practices in and from workable and accessible public and social institutions. It must be possible to organize and manage work processes more intelligently, humanely, and thoughtfully than what we witness today in many social, educational, and medical institutions.

Dutch scientist Tonkens (2008, translation by author) provides a democratic way out from the stranglehold of neoliberal policies over social institutions, professional workers, and their

customers. Although it is based on the situation in the Netherlands, it may well also be relevant for other countries facing similar problems:

1. Acknowledge and accept the fact that public and social services are labour intensive, and therefore costly. "In relation to cost, it is inevitable that productivity in the private sector will grow faster than in the public and social service sectors. This is a result of the different characteristics of these sectors. For example, assembling a computer can be achieved ever more quickly; teaching or washing people cannot."
2. Institutions, workers, and managers should welcome, organize and learn from comments and criticism. "An effective democracy values criticism, dissent, and controversy, from the consulting room to the newspaper." Disagreement and resistance should not be considered taboo. "Rather, people's opinions deserve respect, attention, and a response."
3. When professionals are given a broad task, "allow them to use their own discretion and give them the space to work using their own professional judgment."
4. "Organizational proliferation has to be tempered according to a simple principle: everything is based on personal contact and the relationship between professionals and citizens (students, patients, clients, residents). All work should serve this principle directly. If it does not, it should be abolished."

MOVING FORWARD AS AN INTERNATIONAL PROFESSION

Faster than ever before, the process of globalization, driven by technological, economic, social and political forces, spreads across the world, and changes the relationships between persons, groups, organizations, institutions, companies, national states and international bodies. Many effects, especially the negative ones, are felt in everyday life at a local level, and in the consulting rooms of helping professionals.

Social work is caught in the middle of these developments, which makes the profession extremely challenging and demanding. Additionally, social work is vulnerable as a profession because of its dependency on public, scientific and political support.

The penetrating globalization process generates comparable social circumstances in different countries, intensified by neoliberal policy of de-regulation, liberalization and privatization of national governments, as required by international institutions like the World Bank, IMF and European Union. According to Penna, Paylor and Washington (2000) the "nationally framed

practice (of social work) is unable to cope with social and economic trends that are global in dimension. Transformations in political economy have generated problems of social exclusion and poverty that affect all countries to greater or lesser degrees" (Penna *et al*., p. 110). This is preceded by the warning that "the social polarization and the potential and actual social disorder they produce are conditions of modern living that transcend individual nations" (Penna *et al*., p. 110).

It is difficult for nationally organized social institutions to cope with social and economic developments of international character and origin. "It is time to think globally about social work and consider how professional social work can develop political and practice intervention strategies that can adequately react to these circumstances at a transnational level" (Penna *et al*., p. 110).

In the future, more policies (including in the social field) will be developed and monitored on a supranational level by governing bodies like the European Union.

It is a continuous challenge to uphold the initial ideals of social work: to support persons, groups, organizations and communities, to stimulate participation, empowerment, and democracy, and to contribute to a fair and humane society. The following is needed to strengthen the position of social work and assure its future:

- Extending and strengthening of international cooperation.
- Supporting development and modernization of social work in the world, where needed.
- Influencing of (inter) national social policy.
- Preserving and updating of collective services and social institutions.
- Realizing democratic management & functioning of institutions.
- Fighting for and consolidating an own operational territory for professionals.

It is important to think *big* (= international), to act *small* (in the own community), to behave *social* (as an example) and to *support* each other as colleagues.

Let it be!

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