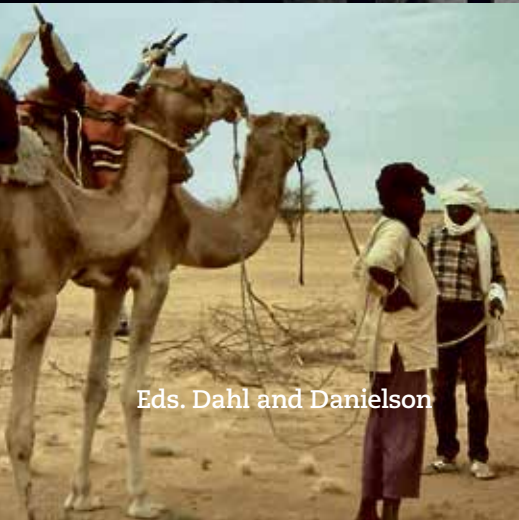




Faculty of Social Sciences
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Department of Social Work

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THE DEPARTMENT of Social Work was not part of the Faculty of Social Sciences when it was formed 50 years ago, but the Department still has a fairly lengthy history. The main theme of this text is to show how a professional education programme at the college level can be included in a university system, and to do this we must go far back in time.

The early history of social work

In 1981, the School of Social Work (*Socialhögskolan*), as it was known at that time, published an anniversary issue – ‘60 years of the School of Social Work’ (*Socialhögskolan – 60 år*). In other words, the first Swedish social work programme started in 1921 as what was then known as the Institute of Social Policy and Municipal Education and Research (*Institutet för socialpolitisk och kommunal utbildning och forskning*). The institute was founded to provide the expanding cities and municipalities with trained administrators and social workers.

The Stockholm programme was, for more than 20 years, the only one in Sweden. It was initially run privately (at least formally) by the National Association for Social Work, a voluntary association with its roots in the 19th century charity movements.

One of the texts in the anniversary issue was written by Gunnar Heckscher, who was dean of the school from 1945 to 1954. Heckscher describes a history where the School of Social Work was tasked with providing a university education for persons who had previously been excluded from these environments. He points to a number of successful examples of persons, who graduated at the institute, including a couple of government ministers (Heckscher 1981). Heckscher was one of several well-known deans at the School of Social Work. Others include Gösta Bagge, professor of Economics and right-wing politician (dean from 1921 to 1941) and Bengt Börjeson, who was known for participating in public debates on social issues and



Past rectors of the College of Social Work: Gösta Bagge (1921-1938), Gunnar Heckscher (1939-1954), Hans Meijer (1961-1966) and Gunnar Hellström (1972-1980). (Photo: Mats Danielson)

who was later vice-chancellor of the Stockholm Institute of Education, LHS.

The schools of social work were nationalised in the early 1960s, at around the same time as the social science faculties were founded. The nationalisation meant that a Degree of Bachelor in Social Work (*socionomexamen*) was now considered to be on a par with regular academic degrees, although there was no specific academic discipline entitled 'Social Work'. Back then, approximately 200 students per

year graduated from all the schools that existed at that time – Stockholm, Lund, Umeå and Gothenburg. This figure is slightly lower than the number of students now graduating each year from the Department in Stockholm alone.

It was not until the major university reform of 1977 that the School of Social Work became part of the university system. In the 1981 publication earlier mentioned, a few years after the reform, one can still perceive some confusion regarding the new system and some sentimental-

ity for the ‘good old days’ when the schools were independent institutions, even if they were firmly governed by the state (Mundebo 1981).

Reidar Larsson, political scientist and the first head of department, interpreted the situation so that, following the 1997 reform, it was mainly the universities that conformed to the schools of social work, rather than the other way around. Think what you will about this claim, but there was one aspect where it was very clear that the entity that became the Department of Social Work was to conform to the University and the Faculty of Social Sciences. It was to offer doctoral studies in the new academic field of social work.

In the anniversary issue, Reidar Larsson expressed conventional sentiments regarding the doctoral education (which back in 1981 already had 15 admitted doctoral students). He emphasised that the doctoral education should not be detached from the undergraduate studies, that good methodological training was required and that research should not distance itself from the practice of social work. One can, however, sense a concern regarding the ties to practical work: “How were the academic teachers to keep contact with their professional field?” he asked himself. There was also some remorse regarding how they would be received by the established academia: “Some dyed-in-the-wool academics may, slightly dismissively, call our education workmanlike”

(Larsson 1981:82). This more or less constructed contradiction between theory and practice, or academia and the “real world”, was of some importance during the early years of establishing the discipline and is still, but to a lesser extent, discussed today.

Thus a doctoral education in the field of social work had to be introduced. The first professor was Hans Berglind, who at the time was docent at the Department of Sociology in Stockholm. He was already working on a project, which had strong ties to social work, before he started his work as professor in 1979. Berglind was the second professor of social work. The first professorship was announced in Gothenburg slightly before when another sociologist, Harald Swedner, was appointed (Sunesson 2003).

Maybe it is not so strange that the first professorships were given to sociologists. Several sociologists, including Walter Korpi and Hans Berglind, both from the Faculty of Social Science in Stockholm, had in various ways, and sometimes with considerable opposition, been involved, with the support from the social workers’ union and their contacts within the government bureaucracy, in the work to introduce the new academic discipline. In one way, the model which they strived for was the American, where social work had long been an established academic field. But as Berglind later said: “We were not, however, interested in

making the Swedish field as micro-focused as its American precursor.” (Berglind 1991:12–13, see also Sunesson 2003).

Establishing an academic discipline

Social work as an academic discipline was created through an administrative reform rather than as the result of an internal academic demand. Historically, new academic disciplines often come about by breaking off from existing disciplines, such as sociology developing from philosophy – i.e., evolution through specialisation (Janson 1995). Social work can instead be described as an interdisciplinary field, with connections to sociology, psychology, law, etc. It has a special focus on what could roughly be described as social problems, and later also on matters concerning the elderly and persons with functional disabilities.

In the early years there was much discussion regarding the content, methodology and theoretical grounding of the new subject. This was often conducted with reference to profession theory, based on the discipline’s international background (mainly in the US), and as a delimitation with respect to other subjects. It is of course quite natural for a new academic discipline to focus on these kinds of introverted issues, even if the answers to the questions posed may often fail to advance things very much. In very general terms, the focus of social work is still usually described as social problems and

various types of measures – both socio-political and individually targeted – for solving such problems. The subject is therefore designed more around a research object than any specific range of theories or methodologies. The research object is, however, changeable and partly determined by historical circumstances, such as the issues with which the profession has previously been concerned. As far as the latter is concerned, this differs from country to country. For a good overview of the early establishment of the discipline on a national level, you can consult Sune Sunesson’s ‘*Socialt arbete – en bakgrund till ett forskningsämne*’ (Social Work – a background to the research subject), which he wrote for a national review of the subject of social work that was conducted by the then Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FAS) and the National Agency for Higher Education (Sunesson 2003).

The teachers employed by the Department of Social Work in Stockholm in the late 1970s often had a background in sociology, psychology or law, or had a background in applied social work. It could be said that the Department was brought in line with the academic world from the top down; the first positions appointed were professorships and the persons appointed were recruited from other subjects. Via the doctoral education, the Department could subsequently appoint senior lecturers with expertise in the new subject.



The entrance to the building known as Sveaplans gymnasium where the Department of Social Work is located, together with the research institutes CHES and SoRAD. (Photo: Mats Danielson)

With the aid of special government support, another professorship was created in the late 1980s that focused on substance abuse issues. Anders Bergmark currently holds this position. Later, in the 1990s, another professorship was created – again as a result of specific government support – this time with a focus on social work with the elderly. The current holder of this position is Marta Szebehely. It would take almost 20 more years before the next professorship was created, this time with a focus on social work with children and adolescents. This position

was financed by the Faculty as part of an ambition to generally strengthen research on children in the context of the University's take-over of the responsibilities for teachers' training. Its current holder is Tommy Lundström. Counting the original professorship that is currently held by Åke Bergmark, this means that there are four professorships in total. The Department also has three promoted professors: Evy Gunnarsson, Marie Sallnäs and Bo Vinnerljung.

Let us go back to the discipline's formation, development and academic establishment. The



Bo Beskow's wall painting (1939) at Sveaplans gymnasium reflects that the building was originally one of Sweden's only two secondary schools for girls, built when it had been decided that women could become state employees. The gender roles reflected in the painting may however feel a bit outdated today. (Photo: Mats Danielson)

first Stockholm-based doctoral thesis was presented in 1983, but it had, to all intents and purposes, been created outside of the Department. Theses from the Department's own doctoral programme started to be published at the end of the 1980s. A decent publishing rate was not achieved until the beginning of the 1990s. Many of the early doctoral projects were financed by what was then the Delegation for Social Research, the support of which was im-

portant for establishing the social work research field.

It is difficult to distinguish any clear theme in the first 20 or 30 Stockholm theses. Their subject matters are quite disparate, but there is a clear connection to the professional field of social work. In attempting to discern a common denominator, it can be noted that some of them had their roots in the 'Social Services Project' (*Socialtjänstprojektet*) led by Docent

Ulla Pettersson. The empirical focus of the project was on what is normally referred to as individual and family care or personal social services, i.e. the social work with and organisation of child protection, drug abuse treatment and social assistance at the municipal level.

When FAS and the National Agency for Higher Education evaluated the subject of social work in 1983, they noted that the Stockholm department's research had become academically established. This is how the assessors described the Stockholm department:

“The conclusion is that the research at the School of Social Work /in Stockholm/ should be considered very positively /.../ The Department is at the forefront nationally when it comes to research into social work, is on a par with other university departments in Sweden, ahead of corresponding departments in other Nordic countries, and measures up well internationally with respect to social work research.” (FAS & Högskoleverket [the National Agency for Higher Education] 2003:324, my translation)

The report also commends Stockholm University and the Faculty of Social Sciences, which may be something worth citing in this context:

“This positive status is largely due to the Department, the Faculty and the University Board systematically and consciously working to allow the

Department to develop its research.” (FAS & Högskoleverket 2003, 324, my translation)

It is reasonable to suggest that, since then, the Department has improved its position still further, both in absolute and relative terms. The Department is still at the “forefront nationally” when it comes to social work research. The researchers have managed to retain a decent admission percentage in applications to research councils. They therefore enjoy an extensive level of external financing for research that exceeds the faculty financed research grants. The number of doctoral degrees awarded is currently around 80 and the rate of thesis production is steady.

Personal social services in the municipalities still constitute an important focus for the Department's research. In other words, a large number of persons have graduated in areas connected with child protection, drug abuse treatment and social assistance. These are also the areas where the majority of social workers are active. In this sense, the research has a high degree of practical relevance. In addition to this, there is a distinct expansion of research focusing on social work with the elderly, most recently through a six-year program grant of SEK 18 million. Research is also conducted regarding the knowledge base applicable to social work and the forms of evidence-based policymaking that have been employed in social work over the last 20 years. One particular area of importance concerns the effects

that privatisation of services has on elderly care and personal social services.

Education

In the early 1990s, about 10 years after the formation of the new discipline, it was noted that the recruitment of senior lecturers at the Department had gone slower than expected: “This somewhat peculiar situation has thus arisen, that whilst there now [...] are professorships and various doctoral positions within social work, positions in undergraduate education are still fairly sparse” (Berglind 1991:12, my translation). In retrospect, it can be said that the education in the early 1990s was in many ways characterised by its history, i.e. independent schools operating outside of the university system. The teaching staff to a large degree still consisted of persons without a doctoral degree. Newly graduated doctors were focusing more on research than on undergraduate education. Combined with the fact that students spent long periods on placements (there were two semesters of placements back then), this meant that the academic part of the social work programme was being somewhat neglected.

A few years later, the social work programme in Stockholm was expanded significantly. Through an agreement between Karolinska Institutet and Stockholm University, the County Council-owned School of Health Sciences in Stockholm transferred in 1998 its so-

cial care programmes to the Department. This meant that the Department was tasked with creating two new programmes – ‘Social Pedagogics’ and ‘Social Work with the Elderly and with Persons with Functional Disabilities’ – as versions of the social work programme.

At the same time 20 teachers, most of them without a doctoral degree, and 250 students were moved from the School of Health Sciences to the Department. The first students were admitted to the new programmes in the autumn semester of 1998 and graduated in January 2002. The addition, which meant that the student stock in the social work programme increased by around 30 per cent to approximately 1,000 students, was obviously welcome. There was no doubt that the programmes that had been transferred belonged within the social work programme. This also provided the new professorship, with a focus on social work for the elderly, a clearer foundation in undergraduate education. Naturally, the integration of the new teachers and students required time and resources. This all took place fairly shortly after the Department had made a rather demanding move from Frescati to Sveaplan.

When the National Agency for Higher Education and FAS presented their evaluation of social work in 2003, it can be noted that the Department was performing well as far as research was concerned. However, the education was not quite up to this level. While it was not-

ed that there had been several improvements made since the previous assessment in 1999, there were still problems, for example with respect to inferior performance levels and a lack of organisation in the teaching. Admittedly, it is hard to compare the various assessments made by the National Agency for Higher Education – there has not exactly been a focus on continuity – but it could still be noted that the 2009 assessment gave the Department decidedly better marks. Together with three other programmes, the Stockholm department met the requirements for very high quality (The National Agency for Higher Education 2009).

According to the National Agency for Higher Education, the education has in other words significantly improved in the first ten years of the new millennium. It is possible to identify at least two factors that have been important for this positive development. The first factor concerns that which was previously discussed: the academisation of the education. During the early 2000s, the Department had, pure and simple, recruited more teachers whose research base was in social work. The other factor concerns the Bologna process which, whilst strenuous, has led to a better quality of education. For example, the programme has adopted a seven-grade system instead of the old two-grade system. This means that the teachers had to spend a great deal of time discussing the quality of the students' performances and that

we have been able to reward good performances all the more. We have also had reason to spend time on determining what constitutes progression and how this should be expressed, from the first semester up to master's level.

One external factor that has influenced us to some degree is the very rapid increase in social work programmes on a national level. The number has almost tripled since 1977, when there were six programmes in the entire country. The social worker programmes at Stockholm University have, however, managed to maintain a high level of applications despite this competition. Prior to the 2013 autumn semester, the social worker programmes received almost 6,000 applications, which was an increase compared with 2012. The total number of applications per place was around 30 for one of the two programmes and around 24 for the other. The admission scores for both social worker programmes are fairly high, and there are currently no indications of a decrease in applications.

Students graduating from the social work programme are in high demand on the labour market and there are no indications of a negative change to this trend. The broad and growing field of social work both nationally and internationally means that social workers today have a good labour market and that social worker students have therefore a good chance of finding employment after graduating.

Some closing words

One may ask how long it takes to establish an academic discipline of good quality when the starting point is a professional education at a college or university college level. Judging by the history of the Department of Social Work, it takes around 20 years if being ‘established’ implies being primarily self-sufficient with respect to teachers, having relatively extensive educational operations, and if the research in the academic discipline in question starts basically from scratch.



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The Department of Social Work occupy the larger part of the former Sveaplans gymnasium, considered a functionalist showpiece. The City Council has now asked to have the building back from the University, in order to cater for future generations of school pupils arriving with the new Haga City development. (Photo: Björn Dalin)



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