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# The Social Work Profession based on recognized Social Work Science

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Generally social work is referred to as a societal practice or a set of ethical principles directing social workers' activities. However, ethical principles represent only one side of the nature of the social work profession, they are not enough for knowledge base of social work. The article deals with scientific and theoretical foundation of the nature of the social work profession. Without science and its theoretical foundation, professions are only normative semi-professions without any clear approach. The recognized profession is always based on a theory that is created by means of a critical and open control which makes possible to correct the results of scientific research and theories. Without scientific research and the theoretical foundation, social work is simply an authority-based administrative semi-profession. The author outlines the scientific and theoretical foundations of social work and its significance for the profession.

**Key words:** social work, research methods, idiographic and nomothetic approach.

## Introduction

Generally, two sides of social work are brought up (*see e.g. Heinonen and Spearman, 2001*): first, social work is referred to as a societal practice or a set of ethical principles directing social workers' activities. When the debate focuses merely on these themes, the point of matter is obscured, that the recognized professions are based on science accompanied by theory. Ethical principles represent simply one side of the nature of the social work profession. These ethical principles are not enough for knowledge base of social work.

The other side of the nature of the social work profession constitutes its own scientific and theoretical foundation (Payne, 1997, 1996). The teacher's profession is founded on pedagogics. The lawyer's work is based on jurisprudence together with its own ethical principles. Without science and its theoretical foundation, professions are only normative semi-professions without any clear methodological approach. The recognized profession is always based on a theory that is created by means of a critical and open control. Criticism and control make possible to correct the results of

scientific research and theories, too. Without scientific research and the theoretical foundation, social work is simply an authority-based administrative semi-profession. This article outlines the scientific and theoretical foundations of social work and its significance for the profession. Primarily three questions are put forward:

1. Does social work science exist?
2. Which are the nature and content of social work science?
3. What significance does the social work science bear for social work profession?

### **The scientific foundation of social work**

Some social work professionals argue that social work is based on ethics and results of different social sciences; it is thought that social work is based on multidisciplinary field of knowledge. Those who emphasize logical empiricism and the idea of unity of science see that social work professionals apply results of different social and behavioral sciences. Others, in turn, defend the viewpoint that social work is thinkable as an independent, special science. Representatives of the latter view find that social work cannot be a truthful profession without its own scientific approach and foundation. They also emphasize that different disciplines cannot be united without problems. Sociology, pedagogy and other special sciences include differences in their approaches and ontological understanding of reality. Different sciences uncover different perspectives and tell their own stories about human lives and living conditions. (e.g. Windelband 1998). Any approaches do not tell the whole truth about reality.

Social work profession and practice requires a distinct scientific approach and theories in similar way as psychologists' need psychology. A profession's own unique special science unlocks for a unique approach to and interpretations of reality and its understanding. Those who support the idea of a unique social work science, reject the view of a oneness of sciences. The representatives of multidisciplinary researchers support, at least implicitly, the idea of a oneness of science. The question of a oneness of science constitutes a controversy that arises from time to time. Nowadays we discuss the division of social sciences into quantitative and qualitative approaches.

There is no complete consensus about science and its nature. Wilhelm Windelband and after him other representatives for Neo-Kantianism criticize the concept of oneness of science. For example, Windelband divided science into two diverse categories: nomothetic and idiographic sciences (e.g. Windelband, 1998; von Wright, 1971a, 1971b). Nomothetic means sciences presenting proposition of laws or generalized explanations. Idiographic sciences formulate interpretations and full descriptions of special cases. Often nomothetic sciences are considered to denote quantitative research. Idiographic research represents a qualitative research approach.

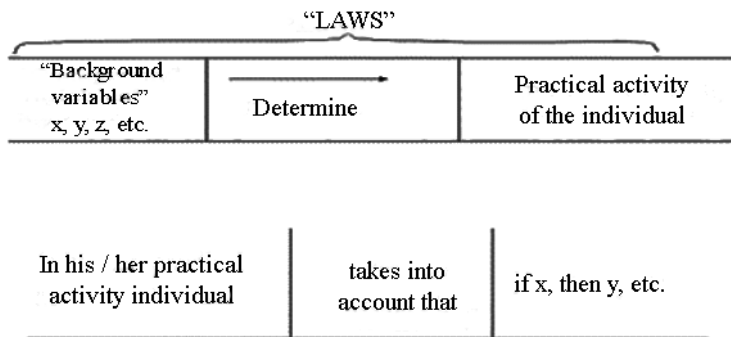
According to Windelband, natural sciences represent nomothetic research. In natural sciences, scientists analyze all or randomly selected observational cases. Results of statistically analyzed variables highlight the general features and phenomena of universal laws. Laws and causal relations include an explanation along with a prediction; when cause A with consequence B are detected, they usually occur together with a certain probability regardless of time and place. This approach implies a certain determinism associated with the world. Nomothetic research is characterized by the ability to study large samples and to make exact measurements. The results of the research constitute the basis for evidence-based theories that allow control and technical manipulation founded in causality (causes and consequences).

Idiographic sciences include, for example, history, cultural sciences, and many sciences relative to human behavior. The target of the study is human activity, working individuals, their motives and actions along with the contexts. The research tries to understand the complete event. It does not produce general theories. The data for subsequent analysis are not acquired through measurements or experiments. In contrast, the material is gathered and analyzed from and through interactions and communications between researcher and informants. The idiographic research produces understanding and interpretations of cases and their action in special situations. Instead of making statistical generalizations, it provides an in-depth understanding of issues and generates clarification of theoretical generalizations and theoretical concepts. Instead of statistical additions, the research produces interpretation and theoretical and conceptual details for a deeper awareness of things.

The division into nomothetic and idiographic sciences includes three key aspects (e.g. von Wright, 1971a; Windelband, 1998):

1. There are differences between natural phenomena and social phenomena that need to be addressed when choosing research designs and methods.
2. Without identifying differences in phenomena, research distorts reality.
3. Science is not a solitary monolithic entity.

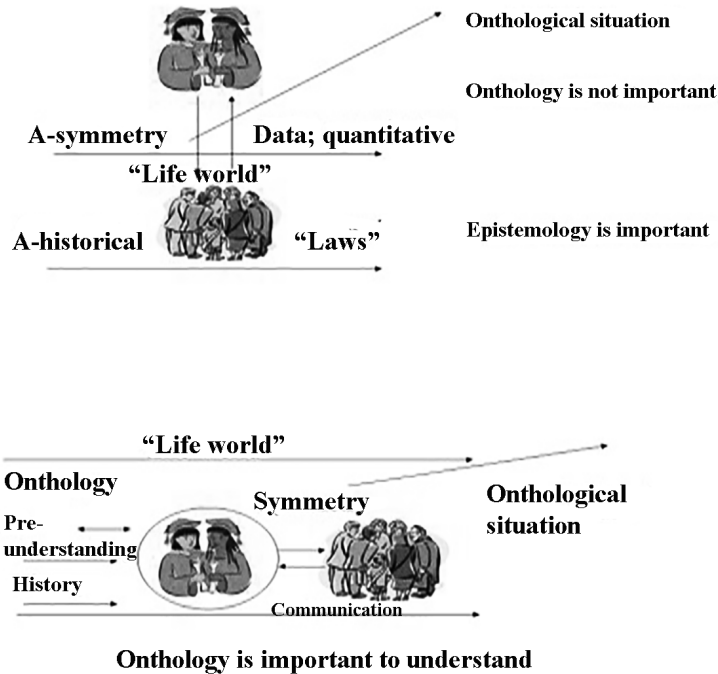
Natural phenomena include causality. This means that phenomenon A causes a consequence B. This causal relationship can be found in natural phenomena by analyzing a sufficient number of cases. Social phenomena include some kind of voluntarism and choices, and decision making. These phenomena are in a special way teleological, not causal and deterministic. Nature of explanation of natural phenomena and interpretation of social phenomena are described in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1. Causal explanation and teleological interpretation**

(Source: Eskola, 1988.)

Causality involves certain amount of determinism and mechanism. In social phenomena, things are related to purpose, or teleology. People act consciously. They set targets as well as make choices. Results of nomothetic and idiographic research include differences. These differences arising from ontological issues and scientific approaches. These differences are illustrated in the Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2. Nomothetic and idiographic scientific approaches**

(Source: ideas of von Wright, 1971, and Eskola, 1988.)

A nomothetic natural scientist operates, in a sense, outside her object, as opposed to an idiographic researcher of social phenomena, who lives in the very world what he/she studies. The latter researcher is a part of its own study field and acquires his material by communicating with informants. The researcher together with informants tries to map the key factors involved in the activities and behavior.

A natural researcher is characterized by a certain distance to her subjects, because she cannot communicate with them as a social scientist would do. If a social scientist would work with her informant like a natural scientist, she would distort her own research. She would see it, at least implicitly, a-historical, and to some extent deterministic, without human consciousness, goals and choices. People would be reified as research objects. This does not mean that a social scientist cannot utilize the natural researcher's approach; however, she must be aware of the consequences of her choices. These include: distortion of social reality and legitimate technical interests along with manipulation and control. She embraces the role of a kind of social engineer. When a social scientist makes interpretations, simultaneously she builds a new awareness and releases prospects for novel opportunities. She does not act manipulatively, yet. She releases consciousness and uncover new life horizons.

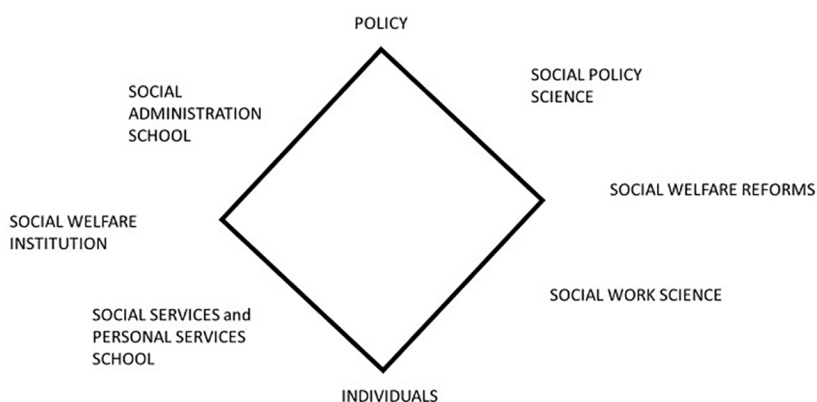
The so-called positivism has emphasized the oneness of science. According to positivistic researchers, science forms one entity. This is possible because mathematical physics is offered as the ideal model and standard to all research areas. Positivists

emphasize that mathematics is the most advanced language in science. Researchers should express their results through mathematics. When the results of all research areas are expressed in the language of mathematics, they can eventually be restored or reduced to mathematical physics.

Windelband along with other later representatives of Neo-Kantianism sharing the knowledge of nomothetic and idiographic science does not accept the idea of oneness in science. They raise two points: first, there are differences between natural phenomena and social phenomena, which must be considered in the research approaches and in choices methodology and methods. Natural phenomena involve causality. Social phenomena are teleological. Then again, the oneness of sciences cannot be attained because the teleology and causality cannot be reduced into one another without residues. They are two different ontological aspects that research can profit from. Both causality and teleology of phenomena are things that cannot be empirically tested; they are fruitful approaches. At one time G.H. von Wright stated that the fundamental science comprises ontological issues which cannot be empirically verified. The science includes many paradoxes, fallacies of argumentation and impossibility theorems, too.

### Social work in science and practice

In the field of science defined by Windelband social work falls among the idiographic sciences; I will justify this a little later. But social work is also unique among other welfare sciences. Social work and its study deal with phenomena related to well-being and social issues. It is not the only one unique science to investigate welfare issues. Well-being research topics approaches can be divided according to the way shown in Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3. Social work and other welfare sciences**

(Source: ideas of Lorenz, 1993; Day, 1997; Erskine, 1998, Heinonen and Spearman, 2001; Urponen, 2014, 2017.)

Social policy analyzes relationships between policy issues and social-welfare reforms, their implementations or requirements. Social policy is interested in expanding and accustoming politically defined social rights (mainstream in the Nordic Countries). Social administrative approaches (social welfare institutional school) analyze policy issues and social-welfare institutions and their relations (Tittmus and England). The research orientation is aimed at analyzing the construction and operation of politically defined welfare institutions.

Social welfare and personal service schools analyze the activities and relationships between social-welfare institutions and individual citizens. The research provides information about cases and resource-management activities that support the survival of citizens in life situations where there is lack of necessary resources. Social work research involves understanding needed to supply everyday life for citizens. The research reveals resource shortages along with lack of social rights and needs for empowerment. The research communicates what kind of problematic situations citizens are enduring and what is taken on for citizens, by society at large with its institutions, in certain explicit life situations. The basic nature of social work exemplifies critical social science. When it promotes this awareness of things, it opens new horizons for the future.

Social work belongs undoubtedly to Windelband's typology in the range of idiographic sciences. Social work investigates cases. Its research seeks to analyze and interpret individual cases based on their historical background and to unveil contexts and motives. The research does not investigate deterministic and mechanical causal relationships. It focuses on interpretations, presented by the actors, about their situation and its background, activities and ideas. Events are, in a sense, socially constructed. The research tries to reveal the whole entity and its deep-rooted structure.

The phenomena of social work can also be studied from a nomothetic point of departure. However, the approach involves certain consequences which the researcher should be aware of. First, she is distorting the social reality. The informant is involved in determinism, while certain causes lead to certain actions and consequences. The researcher is unrestricted to make decisions and choices. Objectified individuals and an unrestricted researcher are though in opposition. Yet the researcher provides information that allows for control and manipulation. She contributes in some way to social work by means of a social engineering activity. The nomothetic approach is appropriate in situations where the prevalence and incidence of phenomena are recorded.

An idiographic research approach comes naturally for a social worker. He is a researcher who performs idiographic research in her daily customer work. She is doing a case study by gathering information about customers, customer families, and customer communities. The researcher creates an image of problem situations and problematic living conditions. At the same time, she clarifies theoretical concepts related to them and illuminates the diversity of phenomena. Information is generated through mutual communication. This will reveal contextual details, customer behavior, their goals, motives and what they consider in their behavior. We also get information about what is rational in the irrational performance of our customers. The problem is how we can disclose the results of the analysis without violating the client's social rights.

However, social work is not a well-being research in the sense that it would outline a good life or well-being (e.g. Compton, Gallaway, Cournyhero, 2005). It is incremental in character and helps to eliminate bad living conditions. It is easier to eliminate bad

living conditions than to set goals for building good lives. A social worker has accumulated knowledge of experience and can also approach things through intuition. However, based in these elements one cannot build a professional social work. There is a need for research to analyze and systematize the reality and accomplishments in it. Through systematic analysis, new awareness and new horizons of activity for both the social worker and the customer are unlocked. Unlocking new possibilities is also important for the customer, because she herself resolves her life problems. The social worker only makes problem solving possible. As an idiographic area of expertise, social work faces two major challenges: independent research designs along with developing methods and finding answers to ethical challenges, when publishing the results of the analyzes.

### Conclusions

1. Social work science can exist. It is very important for the social work profession. Social work as a special science opens ontological and theoretical perspectives from social reality to social workers as professionals,

2. Social work is not a general welfare science. As a special science it handles and studies social reforms and changes in the everyday life of individuals and families in their life contexts. As a special science social work is incremental,

3. Social work research and its interpretations produce knowledge, deepen understanding and uncover new life horizons and alternatives. Social work research can be a independent profession. But we have to remember that all social workers are researchers in their everyday work, too. There are idiographic and case researchers when they are making assessment of life situations with their clients. That is why social work professionals have to be more interested in how to apply research methods in their work and what lives of clients tell about society. Social work evaluates the society from a special approach. It tells stories of those people who suffer from lack of resources and human rights.

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## Sociālā darba profesijas pamatojums atzītā sociālā darba zinātnē

### *Kopsavilkums*

Vispārīgā nozīmē par sociālo darbu runā kā par sabiedrisku praksi vai ētiskiem principiem, kas vada sociālā darbinieka aktivitātes. Tomēr ētiskie principi raksturo tikai vienu sociālā darba profesijas aspektu, jo ar tiem vien sociālā darba zināšanu bāzei nepietiek. Raksts iztirzā sociālā darbinieka profesijas zinātnisko un teorētisko pamatu. Bez zinātnes un tās teorētiskā pamatojuma jebkura profesija ir tikai normatīva “pusprofesija” bez skaidras koncepcijas. Jebkura atzīta profesija vienmēr balstās teorijā, kas ir radīta ar kritiskas un atvērtas kontroles mehānismiem, jo tie ļauj korigēt zinātnisko pētījumu un teoriju rezultātus. Bez zinātniskās pētniecības un teorētiskā pamata sociālais darbs ir vienkārši uz autoritāti balstīta administratīva “pusprofesija”. Autors iezīmē sociālā darba pētnieciskos un teorētiskos pamatus un to nozīmi profesijas attīstībā.

**Atslēgas vārdi:** sociālais darbs, pētniecības metodes, ideogrāfiskā un nomotētiskā pieeja.



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