Kyösti Raunio: 
From Self-Sufficiency to Diversity 
– the Generation of Knowledge in Social Work

On the basis of Anglo-American literature the article deals with the premises of generation of knowledge in social work research and practice. The article analyses the transition from the self-sufficient and exclusive traditional ways of generating knowledge to versatility and supplementary approaches. This transition presupposes that generation of knowledge is necessarily not founded on basic methodological views but that practical problem solving is the leading principle in generating new knowledge.

Anglo-American discussion on the orientation of social work research has emphasized the importance of being familiar with the basic views about reality and knowledge. In addition to philosophical-methodological bases such as these, methods that make the practical implementation possible are an essential part of research. An issue in itself is the relationship between the methodological basis and the methodical orientation (cf. Bryman 1998). It is often thought that the choice of methods is rooted in our basic methodological assumptions about reality and knowledge (e.g. Guba 1990). This kind of prioritizing of the methodological basis, however, leads to self-sufficiency and exclusiveness regarding research approaches.

The 1990s has brought along a new outlook: research is increasingly seen as a practical solution to the problem at hand, so the methods are chosen depending on how useful knowledge they will yield in each case. Researchers have also started to emphasize that there are many ways to the knowledge relevant to scientific and professional practice. These new views call for a re-evaluation of the relationship between methodological views and research practice. We cannot presume that research practice simply builds on methodological bases, for research practice also has an impact on one’s basic methodological views (see Firestone 1990).

In the following, the methodological premises of social work research will first be analysed through the contrast between postpositivism and constructionism, with the Anglo-American discussion as the point of departure. Self-sufficiently adhering to one of these methodological trends leads to problems in the practical sense of knowledge. The problem with postpositivism is its limited relevance for professional intervention, while the problem with constructionism is the bafflement caused by the diversity and relativity of the knowledge acquired. The problems caused by methodological self-sufficiency can be overcome by grounding social work research on the generation of the kind of knowledge that is relevant for problem solving. This provides researchers and practitioners with a perspective with which to evaluate the significance of diverse research when generating knowledge that is relevant to social work practice. It also simultaneously enables them to understand the many sources of knowledge relevant to social work practice. Beside the knowledge based on scientific research, researchers and practitioners start to better understand the meaning for problem solving of the knowledge that is generated in the practice. Also, it becomes possible to base the evaluation of the meaning of knowledge on social work practitioners’ informed judgment.

Methodological Mainstreams

Each of the two mainstreams of research encompasses a different answer to the old philosophical dispute about the nature of reality as we know it. One viewpoint put forward in this dispute is that reality as we know it “out there”, it is objective, external and independent of the observations of the knowing subject; according to the other viewpoint, reality is dependent on the observations, thoughts and beliefs of the knowing subject. This contrast between the objective and the subjective ontological view is often connected with positivism.
According to postpositivist science, an evaluation by a critical research community is essential in order to reach objective knowledge.

Postpositivist Methodology

The essential difference between postpositivism (see Phillips 1990; Guba 1990, 20–23; Fraser, Taylor, Jackson & O’Jack 1991, 7–9) and positivist empiricism (see Thyer 1993) is that postpositivism has abandoned the idea of seeking to find definite experience-based knowledge about reality as such. The presumption is that observations about reality always contain theoretical elements: the researcher’s informed preconceptions, interests or his/her “preunderstanding” have an impact on the observations made about reality and on the analysis of these observations. However, even if there are theoretical components in these observations, it does not mean that reality does not exist in an objective sense. It only means that man’s knowledge about reality is limited, inadequate or one-sided. Knowledge about objective reality is vulnerable to flaws. That is why we should always be ready to change our views about reality as new evidence accumulates.

Postpositivist science does not in the same way as positivist science (see Thyer 1993) underline the careful following of an experimental method as a reliable way to knowledge about reality. When it comes to methods, postpositivist research has been considered to favour critical versatility. Research based on different kinds of data, theories and analysis methods yields less distorted knowledge. However, in practice postpositivist research prioritizes quantitative methods in generating reliable knowledge about reality (Fraser, Taylor, Jackson & O’Jack 1991, 8–9). This is due to the aspiration of finding generalizations that can explain and predict the appearance of various phenomena in reality.

The basis for the objective postpositivist scientific view is the division of conceptions (concepts, theories, interpretations) about reality and the actual reality. Different theoretical views can be presented about reality, but they are not all equally true. The relativist view of the equal truthfulness of different knowledge-based conceptions is disputed. Resorting to a realistic outlook, one thinks that in principle only one view can correspond with reality and that this view is in this respect more truthful than the others. (Phillips 1990, 41–42.)

Views or interpretations that have more research-based evidence to back them up than other views and interpretations give a more accurate picture of reality. In postpositivist science evidence can be understood widely as comprising knowledge acquired by different ways of scientific trial, not only by means of experimental methods in the strict sense of the word. Occasionally people talk about evidence with an even wider reference, meaning all knowledge that is made use of when evaluating the truthfulness of propositions, whether empirical, conceptual, theoretical, introspective or other type of knowledge (Wakefield 1993).

Even if the evidence collected by a researcher is varied, it does not as such guarantee the reliability of the knowledge acquired. According to postpositivist science, an evaluation by a critical research community is essential in order to reach objective knowledge. The knowledge about reality generated by an individual researcher is subjective as such, but a critical discussion within a research community ensures that this knowledge is reliable (Guba 1990, 21; Phillips 1990, 43–44.) The requirement for a critical evaluation within a research community is that the various stages of the research study be openly reported on, that the generation process of knowledge be made public, which happens best in studies that follow a systematic scientific method.
Empirically Based Social Work Practice

A strong application of a postpositivist methodological view in social work research can be found in empirically based (evidence-based) practice, which aims at moving on from vague practical knowledge to developing and using systematic, rational and objective knowledge (Fischer 1981). Besides enabling practitioners to base their professional interventions on methods proven effective by research, this also helps them assume scientific methods as the basis for their professional client work. A systematic follow-up and assessment of client cases based on scientific methods should be adopted in professional practice, which means that practitioners approach their clients in the same way as researchers who generate empirical evidence approach their research subjects (Fischer 1981; Reid 1994a).

Empirically based practice has not led to the expected revolution in social work. It has been found that social workers seldom use the techniques proven effective by empirical evidence and only exceptionally base their professional work on a scientific design (Reid 1994a, 172–180). The problem of empirical practice has been the difficulty of adjusting the realities of professional practice, a client case for example, to a specific research model (see Fischer 1981, 201–202). On the other hand, even advocates of the practice based on a scientific method concede that this kind of practice is chiefly a goal that can only be reached in special situations, not in all the various situations of social work practice (Fischer 1981, 203; Reid 1994a, 178–178).

Researchers have been able to find effective interventions that have been based on controlled research studies chiefly in the therapeutic (psychosocial) practices where the problem can be accurately diagnosed and where a specific model for handling the problem is available (see Myers & Thyer 1997; Thyer 1993, 22–23). Looking at things from a Nordic perspective, it is easy to agree with the criticism which maintains that the controlled research designs that yield empirical evidence are ideal simplifications of the complex situations social workers are faced with. It is generally acknowledged today that the relevance of generalizing empirical knowledge is limited in the specific and complex client situations of the practice, even if it is considered that professional measures should be founded on empirical knowledge generated by scientific methods, whenever it is possible to do so (e.g. Harrison, Hudson & Thyer 1992; Thyer 1996). It is apparent that even in these cases practitioners do not mechanically employ the methods found suitable by empirical evidence but, instead, use their professional discretion and evaluate the applicability of the method in each client situation (Witkin 1991).

The criticism directed at empirically based practice has also pointed out that scientific methods are generally prioritized as the way of generating knowledge. Those who make this kind of criticism think that the requirement to adjust social work practice to suit the demands of a scientific method means essential limitations to the possibilities of action (Heineman Pieper 1989; Tyson 1992). While those who favour empirically based practice maintain that practitioners should preferably choose a method that has been proven effective or most effective by empirical research, provided that it is possible to employ this method ethically or according to the basic values of social work (Fischer 1981, 203). The implication is that the ethical codes of social work should contain a mention of the client’s right to a handling process proven effective by empirical evidence (Myers & Thyer 1997).

The practice based on empirical evidence means that the understanding about interventions in clients’ problems that a practitioner has accumulated in professional practice is regarded as being of less value than the knowledge generated by research (Raw 1998). People think that practitioners’ experiences of practice are good for generating new insights, new hypotheses for the purpose of testing them with a systematic method, but they are not good enough to constitute a reliable basis for professional intervention (Thyer 1993, 20–21).

An arrangement that is part of empirically based practice can be interpreted as a battle between research and professional practice over the control and definition of the social work profession (cf. Karger 1983). From the point of view of practitioner actors, the issue is the ambition of academic actors specialized in objective research to control and define the profession of social work. This explains in part the practitioners’ opposition to adopting the empirically based practice approach.

Constructionist Methodology

In addition to speaking about constructivism or social constructionism, Anglo-American literature often speaks about constructivism as an alternative methodological trend to postpositivism. When seeking conceptual precision we can differentiate between constructivism and social
In the reflexive model, knowledge of social work is responsive to the reality of social work constructed by practitioners, clients and their contexts.

The diversity and relativity of constructs

Even if we can say that social constructionism underlines the option of a commonly shared experience of reality, it is much more typical of constructionism to underline the diversity of constructs of reality. Many kinds of constructs, conceptions or interpretations can be presented simultaneously about reality. The relativity of these constructs is an intrinsic part of their diversity. None of the constructs can be regarded as better than another. There is no objective basis independent of the constructs that would enable us to evaluate the truthfulness of the different constructs (Guba 1990, 77–78). According to the representatives of objective science, the lack of this kind of comparison criteria leads to a situation where constructionism represents a postmodern “anything goes” view (Franklin 1995, 397–398).

However, it is possible to find a consensus within constructionism about the most informed and most sophisticated view of reality (Guba 1990). This means that a consensus is reached about the construct, but it does not mean that the construct is the best approximate of objective reality. When the constructs are produced in social interaction, it is natural to think that sufficiently informed individuals can reach an understanding of the most informed and most sophisticated construct. It is a different matter entirely who are regarded as sufficiently informed individuals and what are the terms for the social interaction. Communities rarely are ideal talk communities in which hierarchies and the wielding of power do not cause controversial conceptions about which views are regarded as the most informed and sophisticated ones.

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not considered a problem within constructionism, rather the contrary. The view is that it gives the opportunity for many voices to be heard. It is important in social work that particularly the voices of the disadvantaged and marginalized get a chance to be heard (Irving 1994, 28). Simultaneously, in the name of diversity of constructs, we have to note that the interpretation presented by the marginalized and disadvantaged is only one possibility among many others and that those who are better off can similarly demand that their interpretation be observed (Firestone 1990, 120). It has even been argued that the diversity of the constructs could cause the interests of the disadvantaged to be further marginalized and fragmented and, simultaneously, the position of interests of the strong ones to be strengthened (Peile & McCouat 1997, 354). The relativity of the constructs has been seen as a threat to the humane basic values of social work, the endeavour to increase equality and oppose discrimination (Belchamber 1997).

The conception of reality as produced by many different constructs is essentially related to the postmodernist view of reality and knowledge. According to this view there is no such thing as universal moral principles that transcend social and cultural boundaries, nor is there universally valid knowledge on which to rely when making decisions about the superiority of one intellectual or moral view over another (Peile & McCouat 1997, 348; Sheppard 1998, 775). Critical assessments have regarded this kind of view as contrary to everyday thinking. Based on everyday experience only, we can maintain that, in spite of the diversity of views about reality, there are common human experiences which transcend specific cultures and there are shared moral principles which guide the interaction between different social and cultural groups. Otherwise social life would not be possible (Gray 1995, 58).

Professionals in social work have also held the view that it is not possible to do social work with the postmodernist moral vacuum as the premise. When doing social work, one should base it on the premise that there are certain universal moral principles which guide the work that is done with clients. However, moral principles cannot be applied mechanically. Practitioners need to have an open and reflective approach when applying the principles to clients’ varied and changing situations (Gray 1995, 58–59).

The kind of relativism which claims that there are no grounds for evaluating the moral and informational truthfulness of the different interpretations presented about reality knocks the bottom out of professional practitioners’ informed judgment and of the rational action based on this (cf. Wakefield 1995, 16; Peile & McCouat 1997, 355). People may expect that practitioners’ rational action means that, instead of relativism, they adopt a realistic view, according to which there is an objective reality which is not dependent on prevailing views about reality, and it is possible to acquire the kind of knowledge about this reality that is in one way truthful, even if it is not necessarily complete (cf. Belchamber 1997, 23).

However, by focusing on practitioners, we are not paying enough attention to social work as action based on interaction and communication. Social work presupposes genuine openness to other people’s arguments and willingness to redefine one’s own position. This helps the parties involved to avoid introverted self-sufficiency in the fragmented world (Peile & McCouat 1997, 354–355). By increasing mutual communication and interaction, the parties involved can improve their opportunities of finding a common understanding. However, this kind of common understanding cannot always be reached and, in such cases, it is not possible to form a reliable conception about the real state of affairs only on the basis of the accounts of the different parties involved. A professional practitioner must be able to assess, on the basis of the existing varied evidence, how things “really are”.

The Many Ways of Research to Knowledge

An editorial in the journal Social Work by Ann Hartman (1990) can be regarded as the programme declaration for the perspective of many ways in research. Hartman favours a pluralistic view according to which there are many different ways to meaningful knowledge in social work. By “ways” Hartman primarily means the different ways of framing questions and the different methods that research uses. On the other hand, she underlines the fact that all ways of knowing are based on and express some basic philosophical views in the context of which the knowledge is truly understood and evaluated. Basic philosophical assumptions should be made explicit. This can, however, be regarded as a critical demand from the viewpoint of many ways of knowing because such a reference to basic philosophical views easily leads to the conception of self-sufficiency and the exclusiveness of various scientific approaches. It does not lead to the more versatile and deeper understanding of the world that Hartman is seeking.

All ways of knowing are based on and express some basic philosophical views in the context of which the knowledge is truly understood and evaluated.
Diversification of methodological trends does not necessarily lead to an increasing dialogue between the trends. The development within Anglo-American social work research has been that methodological approaches, paradigms, have diversified, reflecting the perspective of many ways. On the other hand, a tolerant indifference has been the feature characterizing the relations between these methodological trends. In practice, research is in most cases conducted within the limitations of one’s own methodological approach. One no longer seeks to establish a hegemony of one paradigm in relation to the others, but neither does one seek to find a synthesis of the different paradigms (Peile & McCouat 1997).

It is clearly difficult to reach a fruitful dialogue between different research approaches as long as the emphasis remains on truthfulness to a basic methodological view. Truthfulness to a basic methodological view implies that the choice is made not only about the methods that will be employed but also about one’s view of reality and knowledge. The many ways to knowledge in research become better realized when the focus is on research on practice-level problem solving (cf. Reid 1994b, 478). Then, however, one’s understanding of the underlying methodological views that can have an impact on the methods may remain insufficient.

When trying to achieve a diversity of research approaches and a dialogue between these approaches, it is reasonable to assume that there is not necessarily a logical connection between the methodological bases and the problem solving that happens within the research practice: the connection is something people agree about (Bryman 1998, 141). After understanding this, the questions related to the different levels of scientific research can be examined separately. It becomes possible, for example, to talk about quantitative and qualitative research as methodical orientations that are applied in research practice without simultaneously binding oneself to certain philosophical-methodological assumptions about reality and knowledge. However, people also talk about quantitative and qualitative research more generally as paradigms, so that the methods employed in research practice are regarded as inseparable from the basic methodological view (Allen-Meares & Lane 1990). This makes the natural connecting of different methods difficult in research practice: even if different methods are used without trouble alongside one another in problem solving, one is constantly faced with the observation that, on the level of the basic methodological view, the methods are incompatible (cf. Bryman 1998, 139–141).

It is beneficial to the diversification of research practices if methodical choices are based on the principle of producing knowledge that is relevant for problem solving. This kind of pragmatism in the choice of research methods can be regarded as intuitively convincing, especially when dealing with social work, because in professional practice social work intrinsically aims at practical problem solving. On the other hand, we can wonder whether reflecting upon the methodological bases brings additional value to the meaning of knowledge for practical problem solving. An essential benefit for the practice could be a deeper understanding of the one-sidedness of the methodological view that is the basis for the knowledge generated to support problem solving (cf. Tyson 1992). It is good to be aware of this when, as the general understanding is, we self-evidently base qualitative research on constructionist methodology and quantitative research on postpositivist methodology.

When reflecting on methodological bases, it is good to pay increasing attention to the possible similarities in addition to the differences. Postpositivism and constructionism may be seen to contain features which are at least to some extent similar, even if not congruent. We can, for example, state that, on the one hand, postpositivism accepts the existence of a certain subjective element in the production of knowledge about reality and that, on the other hand, constructionism believes that the context sets external limitations to the production of interpretations of reality. The research that is guided by a basic methodological view does not automatically yield either objective or subjective knowledge.

It is also possible to examine research based on different kinds of methodological understanding as complementary. While constructionist research is interested in the special features connected with a specific context, postpositivist research seeks regularities that transcend specific contexts (Guba 1990). In order to acquire holistic knowledge about the reality of social work, we need the kind of understanding of the research subject that is based on both methodological premises. The special character of context-bound features becomes better understood when we know the general rule to which they are exceptions, and vice versa. This enables us to better understand how similar and how different social work clients are from other people (cf. McQuaide 1999, 413).
The Many Sources of Knowledge in Professional Practice

In addition to finding different ways of understanding knowledge when conducting social work research, we should pay attention to the meaning of research knowledge for the practice of social work. Research knowledge must be placed in the context of the diverse knowledge that is relevant to professional practice. Disputes about what is right or better social work research become less meaningful when we realize that research is just one source of the knowledge that is relevant to social work practice.

Besides originating from the knowledge generated by empirical research, professional knowledge of social work is rooted in theoretical knowledge, personal knowledge, procedural knowledge and practical wisdom (see Drury-Hudson 1999, 149). The knowledge that social workers accumulate from these different sources increases their understanding of their work and functions as their guide to practical problem solving. It is difficult to indicate what the meaning of a certain kind of knowledge, e.g. empirical research knowledge, is as the basis for a certain measure in professional practice. Knowledge from different sources is not packaged separately, for knowledge is an interactional whole (see ibid., 150).

Anglo-American literature mentions practical wisdom as a critical option for the knowledge generated by research. While research knowledge is acquired by employing the methods of systematic data collection and analysis, practical wisdom accumulates from the experience acquired in client work (Drury-Hudson 1999, 149). The special nature of the knowledge acquired in the practice is described with such concepts as “tacit knowledge” and “practitioner intuition” (see Imre 1985; Klein & Bloom 1995; Siegel 1994).

The comments underlining the meaning of practical knowledge usually refer to the relatively insignificant meaning that the knowledge based on empirical research has as a basis for professional practice. The problem lies in the insufficient practical validity of the knowledge acquired by a scientific method. This type of knowledge reaches only insufficiently the complex context-bound interaction of social work. To ascertain the practical validity of knowledge, the knowledge basis must be built from within, from the action typical of social work, not by applying methodical guidelines and thinking patterns that come from outside of social work (Sheppard 1998, 770–774). What we need is a more flexible and more pragmatic way of generating knowledge than the one provided by traditional empirical research (Reid 1994b, 473–474).

The heuristic paradigm that has been offered as the option for the empirically based practice in the American discussion (see Heineman Pieper 1989; Tyson 1992) underlines research as the generator of practically valid knowledge. The criterion for knowledge is its practicability, its usefulness for solving the problems encountered in professional practice. The most important grounds for evaluating the knowledge is the practitioner’s informed judgment, not the rigorous following of a scientific method. Being informed when faced with the complex problems of professional practice implies that the work is not based on knowledge acquired from just one source, and especially not only on knowledge acquired from empirical research. On the other hand, because of the complexity of the problems, no knowledge can be regarded as superior to other types of knowledge. All knowledge is limited in its own way. The action based on knowledge acquired from many sources does not seek to find the best possible (e.g. the most effective) method for solving the complex problem, but it does seek to find a sufficiently good method.

From the viewpoint of empirical research, the critical question is on what kind of knowledge the practitioner’s informed judgment is really based on (cf. Siegel 1994). From the viewpoint of professional practice we can say that the informed judgment is also based on empirical knowledge, even if not the kind of knowledge that has been acquired by means of a systematic scientific method, but instead, by means of practical experience and professional practice. Regarding the practical validity of knowledge, it is essential to understand that the experience that has been acquired in practice concerns the whole profession, not only one individual practitioner. We can give the same position to the practitioners of social work to evaluate the practical validity of knowledge as the research community has in evaluating the knowledge acquired by scientific methods. When we look at things in this way, we cannot say that practical experience does not include a similar checking system for ruling out defective knowledge that exists within a scientific method (cf. Reid 1994a, 178).

The evaluation of practical validity of knowledge by the practitioners requires that the knowledge of an individual practitioner be made public. Referring to intuition or tacit knowledge as the basis for one’s actions is not sufficient.
The validity of the knowledge needs to be ascertained and the knowledge needs to be passed on to be used by other practitioners, as part of their common know-how capital. It is not a rational policy from the point of view of the whole profession that a practitioner generates knowledge only for his or her own use. Passing on the knowledge and experience to other practitioners improves the informed judgment of all practitioners.

However, making public the knowledge that constitutes the basis for the work may prove unexpectedly difficult for an individual practitioner. For it is the case that skilled practitioners do not consciously reflect very much upon the basis of their work with a client on each occasion and, when asked about it, they are not necessarily able to give a clear explanation of the basis of their work (Allen-Meares & DeRoos 1994). Awareness of the knowledge basis apparently disturbs practitioners in their work of solving the client’s problem. Reflection upon the knowledge basis for the work becomes topical in situations where the internalized knowledge does not seem to work, when it is not possible to continue the work in a way that has been self-evident. The requirement to work reflexively applies to a skilled practitioner chiefly in exceptional situations, not as a general rule (cf. Giddens 1984, 282). On the other hand, those who regard a reflexive approach as the norm of good professional practice think that professional social work is in a permanent state of emergency in the postmodern society that is constantly shaken by new changes (e.g. Satka & Karvinen 1999).

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References

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Summaries

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Other, leads to problems in the practical relevance of knowledge. The problems caused by methodological self-sufficiency can be overcome if instead of the basic methodological view, we take the kind of knowledge that is relevant for problem solving as the premise for the generation of knowledge. This makes it possible to evaluate the significance of many kinds of research in the generation of knowledge relevant for social work. Simultaneously, this premise makes it possible to understand the many sources of the knowledge relevant for social work practice. The disputes about “right” or “better” social work research become less significant when we notice that research is only one of the many sources of the knowledge relevant for social work practice. It also makes it possible to base the evaluation of the significance of knowledge on the practitioner’s informed judgement, besides basing it on research.

Fram själfhurft til fjölbreytni – ðekkingarsköpun í félagsráðgjöf

Í bresku og bandarískum félagsráðgjafarannsóknum er hefur jafnans verið lögd áhersla á rannsóknir sem eiga að staða einar og sér, eru sjálfum sér nógar. Í þessari grein er sént hvaða vandi er að finna rannsóknir sem hagnýta stað þegar þær sjálfstæð annaðhvort við sjóþöfðufað aðferðafræði eða þegar þá stunda að hún sést þannig, sem innilokað aðferðafræði hefur í félagsráðgjöf. Eftir því er ekki höfð að leiðarliði þegar þarf að sú þekking sem nauðsynleg er fyrir lausnarleit eru að taka á grundverð þekkingarsköpunar. Á þennan hátt er mögulegt að meta gildi þýmist konar rannsóknir þegar um er að ræða að alla þekkingar sem nýtist í félagsráðgjöf. Samtímis auðveldar þessi afstaða mönnum að slíka margviðlegar uppsprettur þekkingar sem hafa gildi fyrir félagsráðgjöf. Deilur um réttar eða betri rannsóknir í félagsráðgjöf skipta minna máli þegar gætt er að því að rannsóknir eru ætuns ein af þærnum uppsprettum þekkingar sem nýtast í félagsráðgjöf. Þannig verður einnig högt að byggja mat sitt á mikilvægri þekkingar á yfirvegaðri dómreglindi þeirra sem starfið stunda auk þess að byggja þáð að rannsóknun.

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