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Mending the gaps in social work education and research: two examples from a Swedish context

Gap-mending i utbildning och forskning i socialt arbete: två exempel från Sverige

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ABSTRACT

The gap-mending concept is an analytical tool that helps teachers and researchers in social work to reflect upon what, in their practice, increases, maintains or mends gaps between professionals and service user groups. The article suggests a theoretical background on how gaps in social work practice can be challenged. This includes theories about power and recognition. It then moves on to describe the development of gap-mending strategies in research and education at the School of Social Work at Lund University. Lund University was one of three partners that took the initiative to the international network PowerUs that has focused on gap-mending strategies in social work education. The authors have been working over 10 years in collaboration with service user participation in the education of social workers and in different research projects. In the article, they give examples of gap-mending practices and of challenges that they have faced. The first example is an experimental course that has been given since 2005 where social work students study together with students from service user organizations in a university course. The second example is an attempt to combat homelessness in several Swedish municipalities. Supported by researchers, the development project has been a collaboration between homeless groups, politicians and social workers.

ABSTRAKT

Konceptet gap-mending är ett analytiskt verktyg för att ge socialarbetare, lärare och forskare i socialt arbete stöd för att reflektera över faktorer i deras arbetssätt som förstärker och upprätthåller klyftor mellan socialarbetare och olika brukargrupper. I artikeln ges, med utgångspunkt i teorier om makt och erkännande, en teoretisk bakgrund till hur klyftor i socialt arbete kan problematiseras och utmanas. Därefter beskrivs utvecklingen av gap-mendingstrategier inom forskning och utbildning på Socialhögskolan vid Lunds universitet. Lunds universitet var en av tre parter som tog initiativ till det internationella nätverket PowerUs, som verkar för att utveckla gap-mendingstrategier i socialarbetarutbildningar. Författarna har samarbetat i mer än tio år med olika brukarorganisationer i socialarbetarutbildningar och i olika forskningsprojekt. I artikeln ger de exempel på gap-mendingstrategier och utmaningar som de har mött. Det första exemplet är en experimentell kurs på Socialhögskolan vid Lunds universitet, som startade 2005, där socionomstudenter studerar tillsammans med studenter från brukarorganisationerna. Det andra

KEYWORDS

Gap-mending; social work education; recognition; inequality; categories in social work; service user participation; co-production

NYCKELORD

Gap-mending; socialarbetarutbildning; erkännande; ojämlikhet; kategorier i socialt arbete; brukarmedverkan; co-production

exemplet är ett försök att bekämpa hemlöshet i flera svenska kommuner, som har byggt på ett samarbete mellan hemlösa grupper, politiker och socialarbetare.

Mending the gaps

There is a growing awareness of gaps between social workers and people in need of social work support. In countries where the welfare system is more developed and where the public sector is extensive, many social workers function as experts, evaluating other people's problems and needs (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Sometimes the role of a social worker can be more characterized by control, than by an attempt to empower (Dumbrill, 2010; Marttila, Whitehead, Canvin, & Burström, 2010; Ylvisaker, 2013). This is in contrast with a model where social workers work in partnerships with different groups in society, and develop a mutual learning process (Beresford, 2016).

This paper focuses on practices within social work education and research, where groups that have used different social services have been included in mutual learning processes. The gap-mending concept was launched within the international network PowerUs in 2011 (www.powerus.se). It was originally a play with words inspired by the sign from the British Underground that states, 'Mind the gap'. Minding the gaps is often necessary, but within the network we wanted to take it a step further in attempts to *mend* the gaps. The gap-mending concept is an analytical tool that helps teachers and researchers to reflect upon what, in their practices, increases, maintains or mends gaps between professionals and service user groups (Askheim, Beresford, & Heule, 2016). The development of the gap-mending concept is rooted in the movement for service user involvement in social work. In recent decades, the discussion of service user involvement has faced a growing interest in the discussion on social work education, practice and research. Giving the service users influence is both a question of power and influence and a question about developing and improving social work (Beresford, 2002, 2003; Hasenfeld, 1992). There are a great number of studies that discuss the importance of service user involvement in social work education, practice and research (i.e. Anghel & Ramon, 2009; Beresford & Boxall, 2013; Beresford & Croft, 2004; Robinson & Webber, 2012).

The authors of this paper are working at the School of Social Work at Lund University in Sweden developing strategies and methods for service user participation in the education of social workers and in different research projects. We will describe two practices in more depth later in this paper. The first described practice is an experimental course where social work students study together with students from service user organizations. The other practice is a research project, and an attempt to combat homelessness in several Swedish municipalities. But first we will give a theoretical background to what causes gaps, and how this might be overcome. We will discuss two perspectives in this introduction – the importance of power and inequality; and the importance of recognition in order to understand gaps in social work education and research.

The importance of power and inequality

The importance of power, inequality and dominance can be seen as a major theme within the social sciences. One social scientist who has been internationally recognized and debated is Charles Tilly. In his book about *Durable inequality* (2000), he argues that subordinated groups adjust their lives to the present circumstances, and by doing this, power and organizational structures are disseminated and copied in new circumstances and organizations. Tilly recognizes a number of mechanisms that maintain – or contribute to – inequality. One of the mechanisms is a binary pair. People are often categorized in different groups. It is common that these categories are grouped in pairs, as if they were opposites. Tilly gives several examples (2000, pp. 74–75), for instance, women and men; blacks

and whites; slaves and masters; Muslims and non-Muslims. The danger of such categorical pairs is that they are seen as opposites and that one is often seen as stronger, more powerful and more legitimate than the other. In social work practice, social workers and service users can be seen as opposite pairs. When the gaps are clearly marked between them, the practice is often characterized by mutual prejudices (Höjlund & Juul, 2005). This can lead to a practice that reproduces inequality rather than challenging it. In his book, Tilly presents a few scenarios for the future. One is titled 'New Categories' (2000, p. 251). In this scenario, cooperation and collaboration between old categories can create new categories that challenge inequalities in a new way. Tilly gives an example by mentioning the joint struggle for the rights of ethnic minorities. Tilly is not very positive about the chances of changing the mechanisms of inequality in society to a more equal order. In order to make a change, a mind-shift is not enough. Tilly's answer is that we need to organize our way of work in a different way. We need to be aware of the categorical pairs that we build into the organizations or project that we create. So, even if Tilly sees real challenges in changing the inequality between external categorical pairs like men and women, we know from history that there has been some real change, even though there is still a lot of work to be done. So, for those who see challenging inequality as their job – a task that could be taken up by a social worker – to challenge the gaps, by challenging the way social work is organized and how people are being sorted into different categories could be a way forward, and a strategy to mend the gaps in social work practice. In our article, we use Tilly's analysis of the mechanisms of durable inequality as an overarching frame that set the context that in many ways hinders work towards greater equality between categorical pairs that have an inherent power imbalance built into them. Recognizing the power imbalance between categorical pairs is crucial, but giving a group recognition or an individual will make it possible to mend the gaps between social work professionals and clients or service users.

The importance of recognition

The German philosopher, Axel Honneth, is one of several social scientists who have drawn attention to the importance of recognition. He argues that peoples' struggle for recognition is a specific form of morally motivated conflict. The basic idea is that people, in order to develop a personal identity or positive relationships with themselves, must acknowledge several kinds of recognition from others. A positive relationship with one self is, in Honneth's understanding, a crucial foundation for individual self-realization, or – to use another concept – empowerment. This raises important questions for social work practice and education. How can we develop mutual recognition between service users and social workers? The gaps are often causing misrecognition, both ways. Honneth refers to John Dewey when arguing for the importance of common goals in society (2000, pp. 173–205). One of Dewey's most important ideas – about democracy as reflexive cooperation – can be seen as a strategy for reducing the gaps between opposite groups in social work practice. As different parties engage in a common cause, new important social bonds develop, and can contribute to fewer gaps and an increased sense of mutual recognition. Honneth's theory of recognition is a theory focusing on human interaction and human development. Tilly's theory about how inequality is produced and maintained is a theory of how the way we organize our society affects our ability to combat inequality on a structural level. They are focusing on different societal levels, but we believe they are both relevant when attempts are made to mend gaps in social work practice and education.

Co-production

One popular concept that is in line with the strategies presented above is co-production (Cahn, 2001; Horne & Shirley, 2009; Stephens, Ryan-Collins, & Boyle, 2008). The concept has been widely used, and like many other popular concepts (compare, for example, empowerment), it has been used by

different interest groups and with different implications. In our use of the term, it might be useful to quote Boyle and Harris (2009, p. 11) as a guiding citation:

Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change.

The invitation to service users to be change agents, and not just recipients of services, has been considered to be ‘the forgotten engine of change that makes the difference between systems working and failing’ (Boyle & Harris, 2009, p. 11). This, however, does not mean that co-production is an easy and constantly smooth process. We will show by the examples below that it takes hard work and dedication, as well as a reflective practice on gap-mending mechanisms along the whole development process. The first example is a university course in social work, which is unique as students are both social work students and students recruited from different service user organizations. The second example is an attempt to combat homelessness by the strategy of Housing First. Researchers have for many years collaborated with politicians, with social workers and with homeless people in order to develop better practices. In order to understand these examples better we will first give a background to the Swedish setting – Swedish social work practice, education and research.

Social work practice, education and research in Sweden

Sweden is known to have a general and inclusive welfare system. However, many people fall outside the welfare structures and might need help from the social service system. As Swedish social work interventions are mostly individual based and combined with an authority-based control system, the social worker is often portrayed as an expert on other people’s problems. This expert evaluates and diagnoses the problems by need assessments. Thereafter the social worker recommends the interventions that are considered most suitable. The social worker is expected to motivate clients’ will to adapt and help themselves. In this model, the need for structural change often is neglected and a lot of responsibility is placed on the individual service user. The clients often lack influence to change structural conditions, like lack of housing or lack of work (Heule, 2016).

At the same time a lot of social work is done in service user-led organizations, founded by people whom themselves have experienced the problem. Examples of such organizations are the Clubhouse Movement (or Fountain House Movement) – a member organization for people with mental health problems; Alcoholics Anonymous; the Swedish organization Criminals Revenge in Society – a self-help organization for former criminals; and the social enterprise Basta that rehabilitates and educates former drug addicts and offers them jobs within different crafts (Meeuwisse & Sunesson, 1998).

In Sweden, the education of social workers exists in 14 universities and university colleges. It takes three and a half years to become a professional social worker, which equals 210 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)-credits. Professional social workers work within the social services, within the juvenile system, in schools, at hospitals, in treatment centres or in different NGOs. It is possible to study further at master’s and doctorate level in social work in Sweden. Although the education and research system in social work in Sweden in many ways can be considered successful, many have pointed out the problems of gaps between research and practice. Collaboration between social work researchers and practitioners/service users is not so common.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s different action-oriented research projects played an important role in the development of social work practice and research in Sweden (Kristiansen, 2016). Nowadays the situation is different. Since the 1990s the impact from co-production and action research has decreased while traditional social science has grown stronger. The scientific legitimacy of action research has been questioned (Eliasson, 1995). The research councils in Sweden have not been very interested in financing action-oriented research projects. About 300 doctoral theses have been published in social work in Sweden between 1980 and 2012. Out of them only about 10 are

based on co-production and action research. In this light, the examples that will be highlighted in this article should be seen as deviant from the norm.

The Mobilization Course

Since autumn 2005 the School of Social Work at Lund University has been running a course where social work students and people with their own experiences of being service users study together. The course, which is a full-time course for six weeks, is called the Mobilization Course and started as a radical attempt to include the perspective of service users in social work education at the School of Social Work at the University of Lund. Earlier we were using more conventional methods in order to provide the students with knowledge of a service user perspective. For example, we invited service users to the university as guest lecturers and we arranged study visits to service user organizations. These activities were often much appreciated by the students, but we as teachers often felt that they were isolated events. We did not find that the conventional methods contributed well enough to develop the students' understanding of the importance of service user involvement in social work (Heule & Kristiansen, 2013; Kristiansen & Heule, 2016).

We, who are teachers on the course, are inspired by co-production strategies (Cahn, 2001; Horne & Shirley, 2009; Stephens et al., 2008) and we have a good deal of experience of cooperation with service user organizations. We also share an emancipatory and critical view of knowledge and interest in developing alternative and consciousness raising teaching methods (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). Our ambition is to challenge the deficiency and problem-filled approach to the service users, which dominates in social work (Beresford, 2010; Heule & Kristiansen, 2013; Kristiansen, 2005) and show that the service users and their organizations can be vital forces in the development of social work. By questioning and problematizing oppressive roles and categorizations of social work, we want to develop new opportunities for social criticism and for cooperation between service users and social workers (Kristiansen & Heule, 2016).

Formally, the Mobilization Course consists of three different courses. The social work students take the Mobilization Course as a part of a 10-week (15 ECTS points) elective course on the advanced level (second cycle) during the seventh, and last, semester of the social work programme.¹ The course can also be taken as a 15 ECTS-credits course on the master's programme at the Faculty of Social Science at Lund University. The students from the service user organizations take the course as a six-week commissioned education on the first cycle, giving 7.5 ECTS points. The system of commissioned education is regulated in the legislation for higher education in Sweden and enables universities and colleges to sell advanced education to authorities and companies who are in need of further training for their employees. Commissioned education makes it possible to make exceptions from the admission requirements for traditional university education, and give ECTS-credits to those who complete the courses. Even if the system with commissioned education is not designed for that, it makes it possible for us to offer people who otherwise are excluded from university studies opportunities to attend the Mobilization Course and obtain credits. The students from the service user organizations have different educational backgrounds, but a majority of them have no formal qualifications to study at university. The ability to give university credits to everyone who completes the course should not be underestimated. It means a lot on a personal level to many of the students coming from service user organizations that they can take the course and get 7.5 ECTS-credits, because they would not have had the opportunity to study at the university otherwise. Many of our students from the service organizations have proudly told us that they are the first in their family who has attended a university course and gained university points. It is important to emphasize that the division of the Mobilization Course into different courses applies to the formal and administrative conditions of the course. In practice, it is one course with the same content and, in principle, the same requirements for all students. The only distinction is that we have to formulate the final individual examination assignment slightly differently depending on whether the student is taking the course on ground level or advanced level.

The social work students and master's students, who attend the Mobilization Course, choose the course within the university system. When it comes to the recruitment of students from service user organizations we have two basic requirements. One is that they should have personal experiences of being marginalized and discriminated in society. The other is that all who attend the course shall do so voluntarily and on their own initiative. We do not allow anyone to take the course as part of a treatment programme. Therefore, we do not cooperate with social services or other authorities to recruit students. Before each semester, we send out information to service user organizations that we cooperate with. We also inform about the course on Facebook. Many are also recruited by being recommended by friends who have previously attended the course. We get in touch with many service users who are interested, but not all have opportunities to attend the course. Often it is because they do not have opportunities to study full time. It also happens that service users who receive social assistance are not allowed by their officials at the social services to attend the course, which means that they cannot study because they have to be available for work.

We have had students from around 50 different service user organizations representing people with experience of addiction, crime, homelessness, mental illness and disabilities, but also ethnic minorities such as Roma people. For some of those who attend the course, years have passed since they had their own experience of a life in social exclusion, but many are still living in vulnerable situations and it is not uncommon that service user students are attending the course shortly after they have been in jail or in institutional care. Each semester about 20–25 social work students, 2 or 3 master's students and 10–12 students from service user organizations attend the course. A large majority of the students from the service user organizations who start the course complete it. Each semester about one or two service user students who start the course do not complete it. Those who drop out usually do so during the first week of the course.

Since the start in 2005, we have conducted the Mobilization Course 19 times. A total of 650 students attended the course. Four hundred and sixteen students have been social work students. Twenty-three students have taken it as part of the master's programme. Two hundred and eleven students have taken the course as a commissioned course. [Table 1](#) shows that there are substantial differences in gender and age between the student groups. Over 80% of the social work students are female. Almost 60% of the students from service user organizations are male. Students from the service user organizations are on average 20 years older than social work students. These differences reflect the gender and age structures for social work education and service user organizations in Sweden. Younger women dominate social work education and middle-aged men dominate many service user organizations.

The course is based on theories about power, inclusion, exclusion, social mobilization and social change. During the course different kinds of knowledge are integrated – knowledge from research, the knowledge from different student groups and knowledge from the social practice. One of the main goals with the course is to give the students from service user organizations and the university students the opportunity to study together on as equal terms as possible, according to the goal of gap-mending. We try not to give the students from the service user organizations special treatment, for example, we do not distinguish the groups by calling them social work students and service user students, we simply call them students. Our ambition is to, together with the students, problematize and challenge the unequal roles and power relations that exist in social work and which both the

Table 1. Mobilization Course at the school of social work at Lund University (2005–2016): number of students, gender and age.

Student	Female	Male	Total	Age
Social work programme	342	74	416	266
Master's course	15	8	23	30.5
Commissioned education	91	120	211	46.6
Total	448	202	650	

social work students and the students from the service user organizations often carry with them into the Mobilization Course.

The course, and our way of working with it, has developed over time. At the end of each semester we get feedback on the course from students through questionnaires and oral evaluation discussions. Another important source for development of the course is individual exam questions where the students make personal reflections about the course. An external evaluation of the course has also been conducted (Börjeson, 2008; Börjeson, Denvall, Heule, & Kristiansen, 2009).

After a few semesters we realized that we focused too much on the experiences of the service user students and their organizations, which sometimes made the social work students and their experiences invisible in the course. Because of this, we nowadays spend a great part of the time during the first weeks of the course on personal presentations, made by all of the students in front of the class. The students, and also the teachers, get 15 minutes each to share their individual backgrounds, and the reasons why they have chosen to study social work.

Every semester we become emotionally touched by the personal presentations. Both from the service user students and from the social work students we hear stories about experiences of vulnerability, as well as stories about happiness and good relationships. The personal presentations are important to the social and educational climate in the course. The presentations function as narratives in a communicative practice (Wenger, 1998), and they create a repertoire of experiences that contributes to better cooperation and trust between the students.

Through the personal presentations we as a group became vulnerable to each other and it was in this climate that we created a kind of trust that I mean in other contexts usually takes a much longer time to build up. Just that it so clearly revealed that all of us had had our fair share of failures and shortcomings in life created a sense of we ...
(Personal reflection, social work student)

During the first weeks of the course, there are also lectures held on power issues, discrimination, social mobilization and co-production. The students also have lecturers from service user-driven enterprises and there are lectures about project development. Two weeks into the course the class and teachers spend two days, with a sleepover, in the countryside, having a Future Workshop (Jungk & Mullert, 1987) in order to start developing innovative and alternative project ideas. During the Future Workshop, project groups are constructed. The project groups form the base for the project development the students work on for about two weeks after the Future Workshop. The project development is reported in the form of a project plan presented to an external expert panel that gives feedback on the students' project plans. The last week of the course, the students work on an individual exam question where they make personal reflections regarding the course, with the help of the course literature. The exam questions are discussed in a seminar and the course ends with a course evaluation, which includes both individual feedback via a questionnaire and oral discussions. Most of the students are very positive about the course and believe that it has been very educational.

This course has taught me a lot about how important it is to work together with the service users and how important it is to listen to their own knowledge of the situation they are in. This course has almost taught me more than the whole social work programme has done. (Personal reflection, social work student)

Many students appreciate the course's ambitions to question and challenge oppressive roles and categorizations in social work.

I would say that the mobilization course is a norm-breaking course, both according to norms about what social work is and who is a social worker, but also about how university studies shall be organized. At such an old institution like the Lund University, there are of course both the occasional antiquated tradition and the normative view of what is academic and not. Therefore, courses such as this are required, to pursue resistance to these viscous structures that frame the university. (Personal reflection, social work student)

There are also students, especially students from service user organizations, who believe that the course also has strengthened them in their personal development. In some cases, their reflections

can be interpreted as expressions of how they, during the Mobilization Course, have experienced recognition (Honneth, 2000).

I have been listened to by the other students. They have been interested in my experiences and knowledge, which has meant a lot to me and my self-esteem. This has made me look at myself in a different way now. I do not see myself as a former addict, but I have received recognition for the person I am. Through this course I feel I want to go further with my development. I do not want to return to the situation where I was before, but I want to take my experience into something positive for the community instead. (Personal reflection, student from service user organization)

The Mobilization Course has developed into an action research-oriented platform for gap-mending-based networking and development of co-production solutions to social problems. Several project ideas developed within the Mobilization Course has been realized in different services. One example was an idea of collaboration between service user organizations and social services, which the service user organization Rainbow Sweden used as part of an integration project. Another example is an idea of certification of businesses that support service user organizations financially or by offering work for service users. This idea was adopted by the Fountain House in Malmo. After the course many of our students have been active in development projects in various municipalities in Sweden. For example, when the city of Malmo a few years ago started a project to develop the service user perspective in their social services, a large number of the service users who participated in the project had been students on the Mobilization Course. Some new service user organizations have also developed from ideas that emerged in the course. One example is a peer-support organization for parents with children who are or have been placed in foster care (Maskrosföräldrar, 2015). Another example is 'G7' in Helsingborg, which is a peer-support organization for people who are or have been homeless. Former service user students also take part in other courses at the School of Social Work at Lund University, as guest lecturers and mentors. The Mobilization Course is also an important foundation for the development of PowerUs and has been a source of inspiration for the development of gap-mending initiatives in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Great Britain, Germany and Switzerland.

Mending the gaps in social work research – the case of Housing First

In 2009, researchers from the School of Social Work at the University of Lund got engaged in trying to promote the municipalities in Sweden to test Housing First instead of the usual way of organizing the work of homelessness. Homelessness research had shown that the so-called staircase model did not end homelessness (Knutagård, 2009; Sahlin, 1996). Instead research showed that the model tended to increase homelessness, and that people got stuck in the system of the staircase model. During the course of a year, less than 10% of all the tenants in the so-called secondary housing market took over their tenancies (Socialstyrelsen, 2015). The difference between the two different models are that the Treatment First model sees housing as a goal, whereas Housing First sees housing as a means – housing is a precondition for the tenant to deal with any other problems. In the Treatment First model, the client is supposed to be 'housing ready' before an apartment of their own is even considered. Treatment First models see abstinence as a key principle. Even if the Treatment First model can be seen as a logical model, the results show that uncertainty is regarded as one of the most negative effects of the model. The client does not know what it takes for him or her to progress to the next step and there is great uncertainty about when the client can move on to the next level. Research has shown that professional social workers in the Treatment First model spend a lot more time trying to sort out the housing situation for the clients, whereas the social workers in the Housing First model spend more time doing 'treatment' work, since housing is already sorted (Padgett, Henwood, & Tsemberis, 2016). This is indeed a paradox.

The non-profit organization Pathways to Housing developed Housing First in 1992 in New York (Padgett et al., 2016; Tsemberis, 2010). The model has been described as a service, a programme,

a model, a strategy, an approach, etc., but one could describe Housing First as a philosophy containing a core of key principles (Pleace, Culhane, Granfelt, & Knutagård, 2015). These principles are: a separation of housing and treatment, harm reduction, recovery orientation and consumer choice.

The engagement from the university started with organizing a conference on Housing First in November 2009. Two municipalities immediately wanted to start up a Housing First pilot (Stockholm and Helsingborg). Soon Karlstad and Örebro followed. Today 14 municipalities have started Housing First services (there are 290 municipalities in Sweden). All pilots have shown great results and the results reflect evidence from other countries (Knutagård, 2015). In the city of Helsingborg, 90% of the former homeless people who have been housed since the project started in 2010 are still housed. It is not only the housing retention rate that is of interest here. The evidence shows that if a Housing First service follows the key principles, it supports the establishment of a trusting relationship between the tenant and the support worker. In the 'Treatment First' system, the client faces the risk of getting evicted if he or she does not comply with being abstinent. Camilla, one of the Housing First tenants in Helsingborg, describes in her words what she thinks is important:

[...] you are treated like a human being (...) treated with dignity even if you have the enforcement authority after you (...) You can be open, you can be honest and I can, step-by-step deal with what I, myself, want to get better at (...) It is difficult to comprehend that you can be this open and honest, you do not get any sticks and such, but in a normal way, without the lies and trouble.

A key ingredient of the success of the implementation of Housing First pilots in Sweden has been the close collaboration and co-production between researchers, social workers, players from the housing companies, politicians and service users. The most important partners have been the experts by experience. Even though participants from housing companies say that it was important for them to hear about the positive effects that Housing First as a model had shown in international research, the personal stories – of the struggle to recover after an episode of mental health issues or surviving as a single parent with a young child while quitting drugs – really made an impact. In the planning of the conference and in the following dissemination process of Housing First in a Swedish context, we as researchers engaged two persons with an experience of homelessness into the research team. This close collaboration can be seen as an example of participatory research, but also an example of co-production.

In the city of Helsingborg, the outcome of the pilot showed such great results in relation to the ordinary social housing system that the politicians decided to upscale the pilot (Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013). First, the pilot became an established programme and then the scaling-up process focused on implementing the positive outcomes from the evaluation of the pilot into the general social housing system. Housing First has been seen as a social innovation in Sweden, but when analysing social innovation processes, it is often evident that it is difficult to take innovations to scale (Heule, Knutagård, & Swärd, 2010; Rønning & Knutagård, 2015). They rarely lead to systemic change. It is, however, too early to say anything about if Housing First will be the mainstream solution to homelessness in Sweden in the future. What can be seen is that the introduction of the Housing First model tends to trigger other changes that can lead to a shift in the mind-set of social workers, a shift in how the social housing system uses regulation and control, a shift in how the former homeless people see and view the social services – from mistrust to a trusting relationship. These effects can, in the long run, have great consequences for how social services organize their work. There are studies, however, that show that co-production can lead to the opposite effect with less trust and satisfaction in regard to the services provided (Fledderus, 2015).

Here it is important to show the integration between research, education and innovation. During the introduction of a Housing First pilot in the city of Helsingborg, we used the Mobilization Course as a tool for finding out how the Housing First service could be optimized. This became the theme of the course for two semesters where social work students together with students from different service user organizations could shape gap-mending solutions. In turn, the social workers in the city came and gave feedback on the students' project plans and also examined their final prospects. This

created a transboundary learning process. This process was further enhanced when we also activated service users as our co-teachers on the course.

When the Housing First pilot had been up and running for a while, a few of the tenants took the Mobilization Course. One semester later, one of the social workers took the course. The social worker had a job and a position that had as a task to increase the service user influence within the social services. As a consequence of the engagement of former homeless people in the course, when the researchers at the School of Social Work were asked to follow the process of up-scaling Housing First, the former homeless students were asked to be part of the participatory research team. So, what benefits were gained by the former homeless people taking part in the research project? One of the participants puts it this way:

At our meetings [we have had] many discussions about here and now, how everything is at the moment, the development and future. It has felt good, fun and stimulating. I really felt that we have been 'listened to', we have participated.

Let us just quickly look back at the formation of the peer-support groups called G7. At the start of the Housing First Pilot in Helsingborg, a service user was employed as peer support. After a while the service user felt that it was difficult to support other people who could be active in their drug use while he himself lived in a so-called training flat where abstinence was required. He quit the job and at the same time he took the Mobilization Course. During the work with the assignment of creating a project plan, he and the first few tenants of the Housing First pilot in Helsingborg decided to start a peer-support group. This resulted in the formation of a bottom-up initiative called G7 (Group seven, named after the first seven members). One reason for creating a new group was the lack of services that could provide peer support for people who take medicine for ADHD, substitution maintenance therapy, etc. Some service user organizations call this a type of treatment for 'state drugs'. In this way, the new peer-support group could mend the gap between the service users' needs and the lack of existing services. One of the core principles of Housing First, harm reduction, is controversial and is seen as something negative by several service user organizations, an opinion that is shared by many stakeholders in Sweden.

The Housing First service is still up and running and one could argue that one of the main positive effects is the co-production of the reorganization of the social housing system (cf. Osborne, Radnor, Kinder, & Vidal, 2015). It might sound easy, but handing over power to the people whose lives you have been taught to be an expert on is difficult. You have to think differently and make sure that everyone is recognized and that different forms of knowledge are treated as equally important. In the research group, we did have discussions on if the service users should be present at all meetings. We as researchers stressed that this should be the case, but not all participants were comfortable at first. Soon, this anxiety had disappeared and we can now define the team as a team.

Two examples of reconstruction and recognition

Both the Mobilization Course and the implementation of Housing First show practices that have been reconstructed and organized in a radically different way. They both have reorganized the power balance by recognizing the unique knowledge of the service user in the practice development. Creating new roles, changing the former binary pair of service user and client, in line with the idea of co-production, have been essential for the credibility and the trust between the participants. Those roles can be encouraged, only when the organization reflects upon structural inequality and challenges the mechanisms that uphold gaps that hinder mutual learning processes. One example of this is how the equal arrangements for the two student groups, both getting 7.5 university credits, communicate the depth of organizational change. The participation is not tokenistic, it is for real. On a structural level, reflections of a deconstructive nature can lead to a reconstruction of a more equal practice. But people defending the old ways of doing things can also question the reconstructed practice.

Once the structural conditions allow more equal relationships, focus can be changed to developing trust and recognition between the participants so that the result will be empowering to all. The students and the participants who have been quoted above show how they value receiving recognition by statements like they have been ‘treated with dignity’, or that they ‘have been listened to’. Relationships of recognition can be planned and encouraged both on a structural level, the way we organize our practice and our roles, and on a relational level, how we let the other be seen, heard and valued.

Discussion

The two examples above have shown that strategies that reduce the gaps between researchers, social workers and service users can be developed and refined. There have been many obstacles during the years of developments and hardships of varied kinds. Some of them have to do with the structures that surround the daily practices, but also conventions that are taken for granted rather than being challenged. When groups that do not usually collaborate develop projects and knowledge together, a curious and humble attitude towards ‘the other’ is called for. There is a real challenge of not emulating already existing categorical pairs into the practices that are being created. The whole reason why many of the inequalities persist is that the binary pairs are copied into new organizations. This is easier than creating new ones. The external pairs also have a greater support from the surroundings because they are institutionalized and taken for granted. Thinking in a new way about a categorical pair is essential, but a mind-shift also needs a new way of organizing in order for the change to have an effect. Bringing service users in as experts of experience creates an opportunity for a recognition to occur. Many of the adjustments that have been made over the years in the example projects have been done because of an increased understanding of how the activities should best be framed so that the lasting result will actually lead to mended gaps in society. The academic role of the teacher, or the researcher in such interactive processes is challenging and rewarding, but differs from more traditional approaches. Working with interactive methods can never be seen as quick fixes. It takes a lot of dedication to the change process – a process that has to be given the time and recourses that are required for sustainable change. It can also take time and effort for the researcher to seek distance from the more entrepreneurial role of project developer, in order to understand and theorize the empirical material. To include service users in the development of practice and of research also awakes some ethical questions. Issues of power and ownership must be discussed and involvement should not be tokenistic, but meaningful to all parties.

Note

1. The Bachelor of Science Programme in Social Work in Sweden is offered by 14 different universities and colleges. The programme consists of 7 semesters (210 ECTS) and leads to a professional qualification with the title ‘Socionom’.

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