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Transforming a disempowered social worker profession using participatory action research in Greenland

Abstract

The social worker profession in Greenland has to some extent been overlooked in Greenlandic social research the last 50 years. Perhaps it is because the professionals have not had a voice in the social political debate, or it may be due to the fact that the majority of social research conducted in Greenland has a traditional approach to research as an objectifying activity. To counter-act these hypotheses, this research project is inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, modern Marxism, and critical theory. An analysis of how current working conditions and structures disempower the possibility of doing what social workers in Greenland view as good social work is followed by a discussion of how we have designed this study as a participatory action research project. Participation is about inviting social workers to collaborate with us during the project - a process we believe will result in democratic sustainable research. Moving from problem identification via participatory collaboration and on to problem solving through the transformative methodologies of focus groups and workshops, the empirical findings will guide the next steps of the research process towards creating a better understanding of social workers' working conditions.

The focus of this paper³ is a discussion of the conditions for performing social work in Greenland.⁴ When we talk about social work in Greenland, the term relates to a Scandi-

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4 According to tradition within the Institute of Nursing and Health Sciences this paper has a dual authorship. The paper is written by the first author under guidance of the PhD-counsellor who is listed as the second author.

navian tradition of working within a bureaucracy with social clients in a public welfare system. Greenland has “inherited” this way of conducting welfare work from the former colonial power Denmark. But in contrast to the Danish social worker profession, which has an active trade union and is visible in the political debate, in the media, and in research into welfare and other social themes, the Greenlandic social worker profession is almost invisible. This paper will emphasise two problems arising from this invisibility. The first is a lack of political focus on realpolitik or what is called street-level bureaucracy. Michael Lipsky pointed out that in spite of a large politically ruled bureaucracy founded upon carefully written social legislation, social policies are often implemented by single individual public employees. Lipsky named these employees “street-level bureaucrats” (which covers police officers, teachers and social workers), since all of these professions have discretion as a central part of their job functions. The study showed that the result of professional discretion in social matters varies according to individual employees and thus determines the practical reality of political implementation (Lipsky 1980). By not engaging with the social workers we have no insight into how the country’s social policies are carried out. This issue has also been confirmed in a more general aspect concerning the lack of insight into the democracy and the constitution of Greenlandic organisations (Carlsen 2005). The second issue is that invisibility relates to the lack of recognition of the important position that the social workers in the welfare system possess. If a country’s administration is allowing a central profession like social workers to go overlooked by not including their experience in the formation of social policies, not addressing their work conditions, and not discussing how they can contribute to the future efforts to enhance the country’s overall welfare level, there is a risk of signalling that social work is a low profile job. A low profile profession will not attract the best and brightest students, other than the most passionate. Invisibility could create a negative spiral of having less competent professionals handling what in Greenland are seen as severe social problems such as children growing up in homes with physical, psychological, and substance abuse.

The paper is structured out of an inspiration by Paulo Freire’s writings about *investigations of meaningful thematics* (Freire 2007:102). Heavily inspired by the young Marx, Freire was in his studies aligned with Engels’ idea of doing research that benefitted those at the “bottom of society.” Secondly, Freire had a very clear dialogical understanding of society as divided between those who oppress and those who were oppressed. Freire worked towards shifting this unequal power balance through research that, to the individual, was contextual and had a recognisable focus. His perspective was similar to how we act today in the Greenlandic project with the social workers when we are addressing a problem through identification and problem solving. As a consequence, instead of “just” leaning upon available described statistical research, we engage in dialogue and problem solving with the social workers in order to create solutions and ideas to which the professionals can relate. This is our interpretation of investigating meaningful thematics.

Inspired by the Latin-American participatory action research (PAR) tradition, this

project is organised as a PAR project in order to establish a cooperative with the social workers in the capital Nuuk, which houses the Greenlandic municipality with the largest workforce of social workers. PAR is also viewed as a research perspective that easily relates to empowerment processes.

The rest of the paper will follow with an analysis of how PAR is a new approach compared with the current contemporary approach to Greenlandic social science, which we argue is insufficient if left unchanged. This discussion is followed by a disempowerment analysis. The paper finishes with a final look into the empirical work of the project, followed by concluding remarks.

A Critical Perspective on Greenlandic Social Science

To tell the modern story of Greenland from a social science perspective would be the story about a post-colonised society that has undergone a very rapid modernisation process with benefits including advances in infrastructure, health care, education, and welfare. The disadvantages⁵ are the downside of any accelerated development: alienation, urbanisation, and capitalisation (Lee & Newby 1983). When focusing on social science and social research into Greenland, these activities have largely been conducted, planned, designed and analysed from afar, mostly 4,000 km away in Denmark. From a critical point of view we can attach three characteristics to the social science research into welfare issues that has been conducted in Greenland to date: the first is “limits in the freedom of research”; the second is the use of “traditional methodology;” and the third we will call “distance relating to the research perspective.”

The first characteristic, “limits in the freedom of research,” relates to the conclusion that there are few research projects free of political interests. Social science in Greenland has mostly been commissioned by the Greenlandic or Danish governments. The research results would often serve as policymaking tools when the government or administration needed to know the extent of certain social problems. When Greenland was a Danish county, a majority of social science was conducted by Udvalget For Samfundsforskning I Grønland (The Committee for Social Research in Greenland) under what was then the ministry of Greenland in the Danish government. The committee researched subjects like: alcohol consumption (Udvalget For Samfundsforskning I Grønland 1960), family life (Bentzon 1961; Udvalget For Samfundsforskning I Grønland 1961a) and education (Udvalget For Samfundsforskning I Grønland 1961b). Most studies were quantifiable except for some studies about everyday life in the settlements, which methodologically were carried out

5 The description of disadvantages could be criticised for being too superficial. We apologise for not being able to go further into this highly relevant theme, but space considerations of the paper do not allow it.

like ethnographic fieldwork (Gullestrup et al. 1975). The research data was produced with Greenlanders acting as interpreters and helpers, but rarely serving as co-researchers with perhaps one sociologically-relevant exception: one of the leading Danish sociologists at the time, Verner Goldschmidt, made an extra effort to include Greenlanders in his studies into social and legal themes as part of what is known as the “Legal Expedition” (Chemnitz & Goldschmidt 1964)⁶. Even though this was 50 years ago, the “tradition” of merely using Greenlanders as helpers instead of co-researchers in their own country continues today. If it had been a requirement that the outside researchers would have had to ensure that some know-how stayed in Greenland, then perhaps Greenland would today house its own social research centre with junior and senior researchers that shared culture and language with the local community. Recently, when the Greenlandic government needed insight into the welfare of Greenlandic children, the research was commissioned to the Danish Institute for Welfare Studies (SFI) (Kristensen et. al. 2008). As a result of the large body of commissioned social research activity that still goes on, Greenland currently has a very limited number of independent social research projects. Conducting research by commission limits the possibility of communicating unedited critical findings. If the research is commissioned by the state or the self-rule government, the appointed public overseer of the project (typically a department head somewhere in the administration), will be required to go over and possibly edit the findings before publication.⁷

The second characteristic has to do with preferred methodology in the research which resembles what Horkheimer (who with Theodor Adorno and others was the pioneer of critical theory) called traditional theory. Horkheimer’s general concern with traditional theory had to do with the tendency to create theoretical concepts that were not rooted in society but were created by outsiders who did not have an empirical relationship with the problem at hand (Horkheimer 1970). Another methodological concern has to do with the fact that the majority of the research subscribes to a positivistic approach of studying social phenomena using surveys, statistics, quantitative phone-interviews, and so on. This approach is very useful, but if it is the single dimension by which a society is understood, it would leave a deficit of knowledge about what Horkheimer calls empirical relations. The third and final characteristic relates to the two previous examples and concerns the distance of the research. One common factor in the research is that it is carried out mainly by researchers living outside of Greenland. The country does not have the necessary capacity to conduct all of these studies so outside “assistance” is required. From a critical point of view external researchers tend to conduct what has been referred to as “helicopter research.”⁸ They propeller in, research, write reports, and propeller back, with a job

6 For an account of Goldschmidt’s participatory approach see Bentzon (1988).

7 The first author has first-hand experience with this process.

8 The Helicopter analogy was thievishly taken from a comment by Dr. Elisabeth Rink (heard during the NUNAMED medical conference Sept. 2010 in Nuuk).

well done but taking their know-how away with them. They might give a public speech or two and write an article in order to inform the community. One general observation when studying the many research reports is that very few of them have a participatory perspective and thus create distance between the researcher and the research objects. We are often left with statistics, numbers, percentages, and a bullet list of suggestions. There can be many valid reasons for the chosen research tradition; it may be that Greenland until recently don’t have a local social scientific research institution which could maintain a dialogue with outside researchers. It could be that Greenland don’t have research councils⁹, ethical councils, or (as we have seen in Nunavik, Nunavut, and Alaska) elder councils which function as both gatekeepers and facilitators of research processes.

In the following section, we will address the reason for focusing on the social workers through a disempowerment analysis. Then we will continue to describe how we intend to facilitate empowerment processes through participatory studies in order to turn a disempowered field in to a power field.

Indications of a disempowered profession

When Freire talked about raising the critical awareness of Brazil’s farmers, he focused on the empowerment of the individual, the single farmer, or their families. Empowerment is the notion of facilitating processes that gives people the resources to help themselves to fight powerlessness (Andersen & Larsen 2004). Empowerment theory in the traditional understanding of Freire usually relates to micro-sociological entities like individuals and small groups who often belong to the disadvantaged class. When following this line of thought it may seem unusual to extend the focus to include professional social workers. In our initial understanding of a social worker, we pictured an educated professional with the power to both make decisions and to take action to benefit their social clients. This however is not always the case in our local setting in Nuuk, Greenland. Alongside evidence of a disempowered profession which we shall explore further. Greenland does not have a powerful network of NGOs who give voice to different marginalised groups¹⁰. The central aim of this project has been to locate possibilities to facilitate a voice to the professionals whose job it is to help maintain a level of welfare for marginalised citizens and who also have resources to give a political voice to those citizens who have none. Being disempowered means to be in a position where you have no influence. To continue with Freire’s meaningful thematical investigation, we took three steps to complete the disempowerment study:

9 There is a medical research council which oversees medical research.

10 There are a few NGOs that focus mainly on children.

- Step 1: Locating the problem – identifying recurrent research about social problems
 Step 2: Involving the actors in the area – doing fieldwork by engaging with professionals
 Step 3: Studying the structure of the area – looking at the structures surrounding the professionals

In the following section, we will elaborate on how the steps towards a disempowerment analysis were carried out.

Step 1 – Locating the problem

In the discussion above we have essentially completed step 1. The social problems of Greenland have been researched repeatedly over the past 50 years without any actual inclusion of the professionals who are working within the welfare system. The know-how of addressing social problems on a practical level is not being situated into the local community because the experts that could facilitate such a process do not live in the society and only “visit” for short periods of time.

Step 2 – Involving the actors

In step 2, we contacted the local municipality at City Hall in Nuuk now called *Kommuneqarfi Sermersooq*, which also serves as Greenland’s administrative hub. Nuuk was chosen as the main base for the empirical data collection because it is in the capital that we can locate the biggest concentration of social workers, allowing for greater variety and nuance in the interviews and focus groups. This also allowed for contact on an everyday basis, which is important in any participatory study. Because of a centralising municipal policy, the social workers in Nuuk now cover Nuuk, Paamiut, and the entire east coast of Greenland. This means that the social workers in the study have a lot of experience that reaches outside of the capital. We wanted to include municipalities in other parts of the country but time constraints did not allow it¹¹.

We asked the municipal office of Children and Families under the Department of Welfare if they wanted to collaborate with us in trying to understand the recurrence of social problems from the perspective of the social workers. The department head agreed right away, and there followed a joint meeting with the social workers to explain the idea behind the project. We emphasised that we were not hired by management to “spy” on them, but instead wanted to research their work with marginalised families from their point of view. We stressed that the main objective was to get them to share their experiences about their jobs with us.

Establishing a baseline - the qualitative study

We started by conducting 15 semi-structured interviews. The main theme of the interviews

¹¹ Similar projects outside of Nuuk are planned in the near future.

were deducted from theories relating to critical social work (Healy 2001; Payne 2006) and an evaluation study done prior to the project where we interviewed professionals in the Greenlandic welfare system.¹² This meant asking questions concerning the structural premises for doing social work. A semi-structural approach means that the interviews follow a series of prepared questions. In order to validate answers during the interview (by asking follow-up and/or in-depth questions), the interviewer has to break with the structure laid out beforehand thus creating a more natural flow in the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

The main themes of the interviews were:

- Descriptions of social work and the influence of management in social work
- Co-operations with colleagues and people outside the organisation
- The consequences of working in a politically ruled social system
- Assessment of professionalism
- Positive and negative experiences from their work life
- Reflections about participating in a research project and prior experiences with research

The social workers were asked to give examples from their worklife on *how* they could tell if a home was suitable for children. For instance, what kind of senses and skills they used if they had unconfirmed suspicions about child maltreatment of some kind. This started them talking about the inner workings of the social work profession and revealed a rich body of knowledge. One recurring theme was a constant focus on the limiting structures surrounding the work that the social workers did. They kept on referring to limits in the legal text, the economy, and poor organisation. In one example the social workers discussed the amount of paperwork that followed a home-visit or a simple consultation with a client. The social workers almost unanimously longed for more interaction with the clients instead of sitting behind an office desk. This preference was also apparent in a Danish study about the asymmetry of power in the meeting between social clients and social workers. The study concluded that the bureaucracy prohibits the social worker from conducting sufficient home-visits and follow-up interviews with the clients, activities central to the social workers’ own understanding of their job assignment (Larsen et. al. 2002). Although this is not a comparative study between Greenlandic and Danish social workers’ working conditions, we still want to include a few comparative observations. There are many similarities in the job functions of social workers in both countries and Denmark has produced a significant amount of research in social work.

¹² The first author took part in an evaluation of three welfare programs in 2010: a child institution focusing on children with socio-emotional problems, a program concerning the welfare of school children, and a family center.

Presentation of data analysis

After the initial phase, a report was written which presented the categories described above to the social workers (Arn fjord 2012). There was not a lot of response, which we suspect was due to the fact that we had not taken any real action in their eyes (we had basically written up what the social workers had said and thus presented them with information they already knew). This is not an unfamiliar situation when working with practitioners from a scientific perspective and is a result of a type of research that is not yet participatory. Common situations in Greenland occur where a researcher presents data to a group of practitioners, and the only real news is that the empirical findings (which contain knowledge that the practitioners already possess) have been systematised. One example of this happened when the public was presented with conclusions from a newly produced report by a recently appointed Welfare Commission. During one of the presentations about the welfare of children and families, the mayor of Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq, whom herself is educated as a social worker, replied to the commission member: *“Thank you for this presentation, but I really feel that we have heard all this before”*. To both the politician and the professional there was nothing new in the commission report. Even though our main eventual goal is to prevent a situation where the social workers became objects and passive receivers of knowledge conducted through social studies, we still needed to initialise contact with the professionals and get a first impression from the field. No prior studies have been conducted into this area before,¹³ so in order to proceed we needed to establish a baseline of contact with the professionals and narrow our perspective to relevant themes, thus staying on course with Freire’s ambition to do research that is relevant to participants outside the scientific community.

Step two told us that the social workers did experience problems with conducting what they understood as sound social work. They also relaid testimonies about their working conditions that when taken together with the analysis in step one indicated severe issues from the perspective of the social workers.

Step 3 - Studying the structure of the area

Through interviews, focus groups, and public records we have identified five themes that impact the Greenlandic social worker profession. The themes could be criticised for being too inspired by a Scandinavian way of thought; we legitimise this approach by referring to the architecture of the Greenlandic welfare system, which is built upon inspiration from the Danish welfare system. Greenland still seeks inspiration and further cooperation with Denmark and the rest of Scandinavia when it comes to areas like the ways we conduct scientific research, relate to trade unions, build a political structure,

13 Action research projects have been conducted in Greenland before which we will elaborate on later in this paper.

and educate social workers. (Denmark still regulates areas including state affairs, foreign policy, and so forth.)

Lack of Scientific Research Attention

This can be defined as research and knowledge about the field of social work. We posed a question asking: “To what extent is the perspective of the social workers included in modern and former research into the Greenlandic welfare system?” Even though there have been social scientists in Greenland since the second World War, and even though the profession of social workers has existed approximately since 1985, we have not been able to locate much research about them other than social workers writing educational papers about their own working conditions. Beyond that, few writings extend to a scientific level. This is in huge contrast to the other countries in Scandinavia where research into the social worker profession, methodology, and theory is a major social scientific field with research departments and full professorships.

A couple of years ago a Greenlandic law was passed to ensure that the teaching that goes on in the education of teachers, pedagogues, nurses, and social workers is to gradually become based more on scientific research. The social worker profession is currently the only one that has yet to fulfil the criteria of academisation.

The Challenge of the Trade Union

Unionisation of professionals is a good indicator of a group of professionals understanding and maintaining solidarity about their common work conditions and the role their profession plays in society. The history of trade unions in Greenland was a complex process with initial struggle leading finally to increasing acceptance (Carlsen 2003). Greenlandic administration accepted trade unions and their right to negotiate and protest if they found it necessary.¹⁴ In the Scandinavian countries we can observe a long tradition of strong professional unions that not only work at creating better working conditions for the social workers, but also secure a voice in the socio-political debate. In Scandinavia it is not unusual to see union leaders speaking on behalf of different marginalised groups which do not yet have a voice of their own. Furthermore we see a production of knowledge within the welfare area in trade journals such as: the Danish ”Socialrådgiveren,” the Norwegian ”Fontene,” and the Swedish ”Socionomen.” Supplementally there also exist a wide range of semi-scientific journals which contain some peer-reviewed articles

14 There was an episode when a Danish worker and declared communist came to the coal mines of Qullissat and started to organise a strike against the unjust working conditions and low salaries together with the foreman Hansepaajuk Gabrielsen in the 1940’s. They succeeded in raising the pay level by 60% but the Danish worker, Børge Poulsen, was promptly sent back to Denmark afterwards (Rosing Olsen 2005:34-35).

that document collaborations between social workers and social scientists like the Danish "Udenfor Nummer" and "Social Kritik," the Norwegian "Nordisk Sosialt Arbeid," "Fokus På Familien - Nordisk tidsskrift for familie- og relasjonsarbeid," and the Swedish "Socialvetenskaplig Tidskrift." Admittedly, Greenland has a much smaller population to support these activities but we do however have a union of social workers: Nunatsinni Inunnik Isumaginninnermi Ilinniarsimasut Peqatigiiffiat (NIISIP), but the number of members is not high enough for them to constitute themselves as a trade union.¹⁵ Without any resources to pursue their course and no trade journal, the union itself is somewhat invisible in the socio-political debate.

Political Attention

This concerns the political focus on social work, the debates, the values, the juridical structures, present political ideologies, and *realpolitik*. When we label the profession as invisible, it is arguably due both to a lack of administrative focus and to the social workers' understanding of the power of solidarity. We commented on this previously when we discussed how social science in Greenland is, for the most part, commissioned by the government. One on-going, but unconfirmed, hypothesis is that the government is interested in seeing ideology in social policy carried out in real life and to see that it becomes *realpolitik*. There are however no indications of this happening. Through our initial studies, we have found that there is evidence to support the opposite hypothesis: that there is not always a connection between what the legal text says and what occurs in the public offices dealing with welfare. One example that was frequently mentioned by the social workers we interviewed was about the legal text: in the social legislation concerning investigations into childrens' wellbeing, the legal text simply states:

*When the municipal council becomes informed that a child needs special support, including a reduced physical or mental ability to function, the municipal council must ensure that the conditions are investigated.*¹⁶
(Grønlands Hjemmestyre 2003a:§6)

How the conditions should be investigated is not specified anywhere in the legal text. There are some elaborations to the text in the public guidelines, but they still leave a vast amount of room for discretion (Grønlands Hjemmestyre 2003b). The interviewed social workers often describe how different social workers have very individual ways of conducting investigations. When the legal text is as open to interpretation as the above rule, it is up to the different municipalities to outline procedures. At the time of the research

15 The last couple of years the union has had barely enough members to even call itself a union (Personal correspondance with the former union leader Sara Abelsen)

16 First author's translation.

in Nuuk, there were no procedures for conducting an investigation¹⁷.

In the social security office there is a huge turnover of personnel, which creates demands when dealing with the high level of caseloads. As a consequence of this, it is very rare to see the same social worker working with a family or a child throughout that family's contact with the social welfare system. One social worker in southern Greenland is reported to have 230 social cases to oversee. There is a limited chance that these cases are currently being followed up with once a year as required by law, and that they are all treated with the same professional care. In terms of salary, the social workers are the second lowest-paid amongst the major welfare professions.¹⁸

If we take a quick look at how the public employers (the municipalities and the self-rule government) support the social workers supplementary training, there currently exists no automatic system for a raise in salary. The individual social worker has to apply for a one time supplementary amount which is approximately a 6.25% increase in salary (Atorfillit Kattuffiat 2012). This amount can only be awarded once even if the individual social worker undergoes more training to acquire extra professional skills such as specialising in communication with children or taking courses on subjects like interdisciplinary work methods, etc.

Situations like the previous example from southern Greenland arise when there is no political focus on the working conditions and caseloads. It could also possibly be a combination of no trade union and a limited political focus. A result of this could be an overworked profession, leading to poor quality social work that ultimately negatively affects those citizens that need the welfare system the most.

Education of future professionals

The educational legislation concerning the training of social workers in Greenland has received little political attention. When we consulted the Danish legislation concerning what subjects to prioritize in the education of social workers, the legal text addresses which specific aspects the Danish social worker education should consist of down to the specific ECTS¹⁹ points of every subject (Undervisningsministeriet 2011). The educational legislation does not cover this matter in Greenland, and only gives a mandate to the institution of Ilisimatusarfik - University of Greenland to educate social workers (Grønlands Hjemmestyre 2007). The educational institution thus has total autonomy over the training and

17 The first author knows through joint meetings in the different work groups leading up to new political social strategies concerning child welfare, that the northern municipality - Qaasuitsup Kommune - in 2011 was in the process of creating procedures for conducting investigations according to the above referred §6.

18 The social workers are making 27% less than the teachers and 35% less than the nurses (measured from entry-level salaries acquired from public records).

19 European Credit Transfer System.

the future formation of the social worker profession. The social workers have been without an academically approved curriculum for nearly two years. A unified curriculum has now been approved by Ilisimatusarfik's academic council but there is no curriculum council. If an individual teacher chooses a curriculum, that curriculum may change if/when the position of the teacher changes. This does not lead to a unified training of the country's social workers, and this makes it difficult to do quality-testing to see if the curriculum is up to standard. The position as head of the department of social work²⁰ has changed nearly every second year over the last 12 years. The past three department heads were Scandinavian and had an educational level equivalent to a master's degree and some research experience. They had some insight into the Greenlandic society but had a limited experience of Greenlandic cultural traditions, everyday life, and the Greenlandic language.^{21,22}

Stakeholder Response

The theme concerning stakeholders has evolved out of an interest in looking at how outside professionals, NGOs, special institutions, etc. have experienced working with social workers. The central two questions in the interviews were first about the stakeholder's own position in the field of marginalised families and children. Secondly, it was to ask for suggestions on how to improve further collaboration with the social workers in the municipality.

We have begun an initial study of how different stakeholders relate to the social work done in the municipality of Sermersooq. To date, we have talked with a wide range of institutions, former employees in the municipality, and NGOs. There is a clear tendency towards a demand for more structured social work and a better organization of the work. During the preliminary interviews with staff and management in different specialised institutions for children and young people, one recurrent theme was the need to constantly deal with a new social worker or case worker. The institutions often experienced having to start over by explaining the child's case to a new social worker which led to a feeling that no progress was being made in the child's case.

A conclusion leaning towards problematic issues

A review of these themes gives an understanding of the frame of social work. It does not perform analysis in any way to find if the themes are deterministic, but does qualify as a conclusion about whether or not we can say that the socio-political field, like social work with marginalised families, is disempowered.

It is generally understood that social workers are in a position of power when they are

20 We are referring to the education facilities of the social workers as a department. Since 2009 the social workers have been a part of the campus of Ilisimatusarfik – the University of Greenland.

21 From personal communication with all three former department heads.

22 The conclusion is drawn from knowledge as a former teacher and on procedures prior to 2013.

interacting with social clients (Uggerhøj 2005; Järvinen et.al. 2002). It is important to understand that we are not explicitly dealing with this topic in this research because it is in itself a huge research field. But when we consider the social workers from outside as a united profession, the element of power seems to be missing. With no research focus about the social workers' position in the social policy field the public has no insight into the conditions under which the profession functions. As a consequence, it follows that no new methods are being developed - methods that could be implemented in local Greenlandic communities and shared with other regions in the country. Through time the nature of the social clients will change as Greenland's economy and social structure changes, and these changes will create new types of social clients like an increase in the homeless (a relatively new phenomenon in Nuuk), or new types of immigrant workers. These changes will require new ways of thinking about social work practice. With no active trade union the social workers do not have a common voice in the political debate and therefore no forum for reflection about themes specific to this profession. These changes will probably not come from the current educational environment where the priority will possibly be on stabilising a learning environment and then later focus on incorporating research into the education process.

Revisiting steps 1, 2 and 3

When revisiting the three steps above we are left with an impression of a disempowered profession. Fortunately only few of the above-described criteria can be defined as constant. A core principle that comes out of looking at this overall theme from a participatory action research approach is the potential to transform practical problems by subscribing to democratic principles in social research. In this project we are trying to approach this problem by teaming up with the social workers. We do not propose to solve all of the above challenges with "one magical sweep of a participatory wand." We are, however, in the following section going to discuss how we in this project intend to move from conducting a disempowerment analysis to actually working with the social workers and applying transformative methodology in order to create processes that move towards sustainable change.

Participatory Action Research as a proactive strategy against disempowerment

Empowerment and disempowerment are viewed in a dichotomous relationship. This perspective is useful in terms of looking at the self-appointed assignment as a problem oriented project where theory about PAR and empowerment processes are combined with an actual challenge in the local Greenlandic society.

During the review above of previous social research in Greenland, only a small amount was PAR. We will elaborate on this by first discussing the aspect of participation and secondly by talking about the pairing of the participatory principle with action research. The concept of participation in political science is closely linked to the idea of a democratic right and responsibility to take part in society. In her analysis of the state of participation in democratic societies, Carole Pateman concludes that if one is to be a participant, this will

require training. Participation is not a concept that one learns indirectly by being a part of an organisation that usually is thought to be participatory like schools, public offices, or capitalistic companies, which are for the most part hierarchical in their construction (Pateman 1989:45). Freire was specific in his operationalisation of participation with his involvement with teaching a vast number of Brazil's illiterate farmers how to read and write (Gadotti 1994). Freire wanted to give the illiterate mass the possibility of having a reflective position towards oppression from the political and military regime (Freire 2007). Freire identified an oppressive field and sought to change the current conditions in collaboration with participants. From Freire and other researchers from Latin-America grew a tradition of PAR, where research was linked to the need for social change (Fals Borda 2006).

The PAR tradition connects to the origins of action research which originated from Kurt Lewin in the late 1940's. Lewin was studying intergroup relations amongst workers in Connecticut. In the lack of any objective way to measure the progress felt by the individual worker, Lewin concluded that in order to study this particular social practice he, in his own words, needed to define a type of research containing an action element:

"The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin 1946:35)

As time went by, the perception developed about what action research is, and especially what the purpose of the research was. In one tradition which to some extent can be linked to the organisational studies in Norway, there is an understanding that action research should focus more on how changes in communicative patterns can reorganise the discourses. Kurt Aagaard Nielsen and Birger Steen Nielsen called this variation of action research "pragmatic" (Nielsen & Nielsen 2006). They identified two major trends: the pragmatic and another related to critical theory with roots in the Frankfurt School. This project follows the latter trend when it comes to the tradition of doing research that relates to practical challenges in society by focusing on ways to empower the disempowered.

Participatory action research and empowerment with the municipality of Sermersooq

Action research is not a completely new phenomenon in Greenland. In the late 1970's and 1980's saw some evidence of early participatory studies concerning everyday life

and modernisation in the settlements (Langgaard 1986)²³. In the 1990's Greenland began to see a few action research studies related to health and medical studies (Rosing Olsen 1997). There has been research into using transgressive methods to give teenagers a voice about their use of media (Pedersen & Rygaard 2003). Currently there is a larger community based participatory study which aims at collecting data and studying sexual health throughout the country (Gesink et al. 2010). In Paamiut the entire city is involved in a social psychological community building project (Berliner et al. 2009).

It is however safe to say that the methodology used in both of the above projects and in the one that we are carrying out, is not well known in the general public. To take a PAR approach is still considered to be an alternative to phone-surveys, questionnaires, ethnographic fieldwork, and qualitative interviews. The issue with these empirical approaches lies with the inability to give a voice to the subjects whom are taking part in the research. The traditional qualitative or quantitative methodologies often leave little room for capturing utopian ideas and thus neglect the participants' abilities to imagine change and act on that imagination in a research situation. By following this line of thought, we have stopped doing more conventional interviews in the municipality and moved on to preparing a set of workshops that will explore new ways of thinking and acting about social work - these are called the Future Creating Workshops.

Setting up the Future Creating Workshop to explore utopian thinking

The interview situation, even though it is interactive, is still a somewhat static way of approaching social work because the dynamic was simply asking questions and obtaining responses. The interviews have been essential in getting to know the organisation and the working environment of the social workers, but in order to establish a stronger ground for doing PAR, we wanted the group of social workers to think more on their feet and reflect together as a group about the future possibilities.

In original German, the methodology was called the *Zukunftwerkstätten* (Jungk & Müllert 1989). It was developed in the former West Germany in the 1970's as a reaction to undemocratic urban planning. The developers, Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert, were looking for ways of doing workshops that would allow participants to take an active part in the invention of their own futures. When the workshop title was translated into English, the translation underwent different forms and is, in its current Scandinavian context through the works of Kurt Aagaard Nielsen and Birger Steen Nielsen, called Future Creating Workshops.

The Future Creating Workshop consists of three phases. Before initiating the phases the participants in the workshop needs to settle on a theme for the workshop. The overall theme in the first workshop, which was chosen by the social workers themselves, was

23 We want to thank Kennet Pedersen for turning our attention to this reference.

“Satisfaction at the workplace.” The social workers felt that this theme could cover both satisfaction relating to specific professional issues and also to issues relating to the work environment. The next step progresses through three phases.

Before beginning, we set up rules to ensure the best possible opportunity for everyone to take part equally and to think “outside of the box.” The first step is the “critical” phase where the participants will be constantly negative and describe their unsatisfactory feelings with the workplace. This can be a long process, so the participants are only allowed to express themselves in single lines like *“I don’t like that we don’t get massages everyday”* (This may be a silly thing to say but obeys the first rule: “every opinion counts”). This feeds into the idea that every participant must be allowed to express themselves freely. The second rule we set up is that the participants cannot be personal in their criticism. All the expressions are written down on wall boards and when no one has anything more to say the participants will vote on which expressions they will work with further. This will also show the subjects to which the participants assign importance. By prioritising, we are focusing on singling out what is most important, and possibly create a sense of social awareness that more than a single individual thinks a certain subject is important. When we have between four to seven themes, we move on to the next phase - the “utopian” phase.

In the utopian phase we return to the wall boards. The central idea in this phase is to think outside of the box. One common way of getting around to the utopian phase is trying to imagine the positive angle of the themes from the critical phase. As an example, if we were to turn the *“no massages”* idea around, it would become *“having massages every day.”* Nothing in the utopian phase is impossible. To suggest that *“we will fly in the world’s best massage therapists to give everybody massages”* is a perfectly legitimate utopic statement, even though it may not fit within the budget for a public office. The point is that again here all the participants’ suggestions are to be respected. The end of this phase is the same as the critical phase where we prioritise amongst the suggestions to narrow them down to a few key suggestions.

The last phase is called the “realisation” phase. Here the participants return to the ideas from the utopian phase and work with what would be possible to realise out of all of the ideas. They make suggestions on how we can approach this, and whether some ideas require further knowledge or even research, and if other ideas might be solvable straight away. The ideas are prioritised and summed up on a list of ideas that we can work with for now, and ideas that need to be investigated further. The idea of *“massage”* may evolve into a theme of physical wellness in the workplace, which might be a relevant idea to continue to work with.

This concludes the current workshop but not the entire process. It can continue like this every week or month, or it can be a one-time event. In this particular case we will return to the municipality for a follow up evaluation to see if any of the suggestions have been carried out in “real life.”

Discussion

Will a Future Creating Workshop approach transform a disempowered profession? This will always be a question that concerns these sorts of social scientific experiments. From a traditional scientific point of view, a classical question is: what is the end result, the product? In participatory studies, by contrast, the result is the process. It is the opening up of scientific research towards inclusive procedures which aim at creating democratic spaces where participants can address themes that are meaningful to them in their respective contexts. So the real question will be: are we designing processes that are inclusive, and is it always a good idea to include practitioners in the development of a practical field? One could argue that it may be difficult to apply external criticism to the research subject. If the researcher is both acting as a member of the scientific community and also as a facilitator, this will create a problem of loyalty. Other action researchers use the description “muddy” to imply the massive grey area that on the other hand can also make for a delightful challenge (McArdle 2008). When a researcher engages in collaborative processes within any given practical field, she/he is also working with human emotion which raises further demands for ethical ways of disconnecting after a given research process has been concluded.

Expected results and final remarks

This research project is designed as a PAR. The methodological focal point is participatory democratic processes. It is about inviting the social workers to join in on the project and about collaborating in order to do research that is relevant to the challenges the social workers experiences in their daily work life.

This attempt at an initial empowerment study has shown its usefulness when it comes to gaining access to the field. From the beginning, the project was presented as research with a strong emphasis on participation and transformation. This meant that we were very clear about the normativity of the study but still curious to see if we could confirm that we were dealing with a field that could be argued as being disempowered, through analysis both from “inside” the social worker profession and from “outside” using a structural approach. We know, from a structural standpoint, that social work in Greenland needs to be revitalised and this research will, to some degree, show that the social workers themselves feel isolated and invisible as a profession and need regain power in the social political field.

The current progress in the data analysis reveals a rich set of data covering aspects we would not have seen using only a traditional approach. Most importantly, by using methods that emphasise participation, open dialogue, and critical analysis, we have earned the trust of the profession that deals with key issues in Greenlandic social welfare. The short-term goal will be the results of the future-creating processes; the long-term goal of empowering the social worker profession is about qualifying the work with the citizens and facilitating processes of empowering marginalized people in Greenland.

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Ellen Avard

Greenhouses in the North: Developing a New Type of Local Food System in Nunavik

Abstract:

Inuit villages in Nunavik currently face complex social challenges as well as food security issues related to the availability, quality, and cost of fresh fruit and vegetables. In order to address these issues, research is being conducted on the development of a greenhouse-based, local food system model that could adequately respond to the social, economic and environmental needs of modern Inuit society. Since 2009 researchers, government bodies and community stakeholders have been facilitating and documenting the development of a greenhouse pilot project in Kuujjuaq and during the summer of 2011 a number of successful horticultural micro-projects were implemented.

Keywords:

Greenhouses, Nunavik, Inuit, Local Food, Arctic Sustainable Development

Introduction

Rapid "modernization" in the Arctic over the last several decades has brought about significant changes in the Canadian North. Inuit villages in Nunavik currently face complex social, economic and environmental challenges as well as food security issues related to the availability, quality, and cost of fresh fruit and vegetables. The research, presented in this paper, strives to address these issues by asking the question "Can a new type of local food system – based on the principles of ecological design – lead to the creation of greater food security in northern communities while concurrently contributing to the reinforcement of community capacity?"

The dominant theme of this research is sustainable development in remote communities and within this framework, the concepts of local food, ecological design, and community capacity building in the Canadian North are being studied in detail using an action-research methodological approach. More specifically, this research focuses on the development of a greenhouse pilot-project in the Inuit village of Kuujjuaq; the end-goal being the creation of a northern agricultural model via the co-production of knowledge with local research partners.