

# **THE PRODUCTIVE HUMAN BEING**

**– OR ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
ALTERNATIVES IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH**

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# The research project

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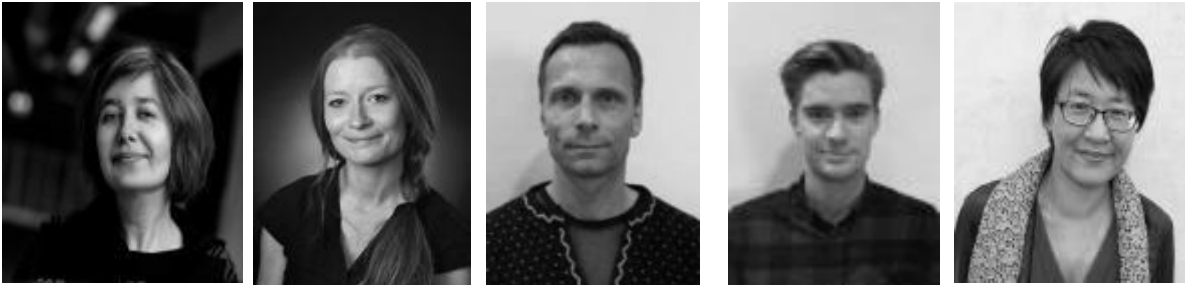
How have **views on human beings** developed in **social work** in DK in an interplay with **welfare policies, technologies and forms of knowledge?**

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# Studying views on human being in social work

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**Social work with a) unemployed people, b) children and their families, c) people with mental illness/disabilities and d) residents in local communities**

## **A historical study**

- Policy documents and publications
- Periodicals and journals e.g. "The social worker"
- Research on the history of welfare and social work

## **A qualitative field study**

- 18 social work units in 9 cities
- 81 interviews (individual/group interviews)
- 103 units of participant observation

## **Further theoretical studies**

- Developing models for understanding and reflecting on welfare, views on human beings and social work



# The idea of the productive human being: Homo Faber \*)

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- Constitutes a significant and predominant view on human beings structurally embedded in the rationales and logics of capitalism and the complexities of modernity
- Is embraced and recognized in politics, in the provision of welfare and social services as well as in the practices of social work
- However, is also reflected and broadened by social workers creating alternative views on human beings: an alternative theory of reflection
- The exploration of such alternatives is an important endeavour for social work research, if our ambition is to contribute to the development of social work.

\*) Marx [1867]1970, Arendt 1958, Frisch 1973



# The welfare of the working man

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“A modern society, where medical science is capable of keeping alive the poorest predispositions, and where anarchy at the labor market and the whole nerve paralysing, accelerated and fierce competition for money in various ways mistreats and demoralise people, must in its own interest watch closely the treatment of every abnormality, if not out of humanity towards all miserable fellow human beings, then out of the striking fact, that the presence of the morons at the competitive labor market tends to deteriorate the healthy, lower the average intelligence and self-control, lower the order and level of intelligence in society ... We treat the miserable with all the care and love we have, but only refuse him the right to reproduce” (Steincke 1912: 25 in Steincke 1920:25-27 in Nissen et. al 2015, Ringø et al. 2017, condensed)



# Enhancing the productive standard of the population

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“Social policy can contribute to improve health, living and keep up spirits. This is valuable in itself. But at the same time this contributes to improving our ability to work and to increase our resistance towards the pressure that changes in our life puts on us. Social policy makes the individual citizen capable of meeting new productive tasks. To put it shortly: The modern social policy contributes to enhance the productive standard of the population. Investment in social policy is a productive investment” (Andersen 1966:15 in Nissen et. al 2015, Ringø et al. 2017, condensed)



# Increasing productivity – competitiveness and opportunities

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“Productivity creates wealth and welfare. The higher productivity, the more possibilities the Danish population will have. When Denmark through half a century and until the mid-1990s developed to become one of the prosperous countries it was due to a fast development in the Danish productivity. This is not the case anymore. If nothing is done, Denmark will fall behind and our wealth and welfare will continue to become reduced” (Productivity commission, 2014, condensed)



# The unfolding of the competition state

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**The kind of welfare state where the purpose of welfare is aimed at underpinning the competitive advantage on a global market** (Cerny 1997; Jessop 2002, Pedersen 2011)

- The accumulation of resources for welfare through increased productivity
- A logic of scarcity
- Efficiency and effectiveness - creating more for less
- Focus on cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness
- Neoliberal strategies holding the market sacred (e.g. Mudge 2008).





# The cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness of social work

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“Now we are able to put a number on the cost in public expenditures. I will put an end to ineffective interventions and make sure, we will have the best methods spread all over the country. We owe this to the children but also to the tax payers. There is good economy in good lives. And very bad economy in bad lives” (Karen Hækkerup, Ministry of Social affairs, 15.03. 12)



# The need to perform and demonstrate results and effects

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**A:** This is where we are challenged. Because without any doubt, they are really poorly functioning families. And we don't have the time. Earlier, we could use the first 2-3 months to support and include them in the process. Now it is straight from the shoulder [claps hands] and we immediately describe and observe. And yes, we have talked about this sometimes, do we lose some parents on that account?

**B:** Is it actually fair to drag parents in such a stressful situation into this, expecting them to perform?

(Social workers, family treatment)



# A historical attachment to productivity and employability

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“Many take work as a daily housekeeper. Little by little they sink lower and lower, become a housekeeper for single men with common table and bed, some become pregnant again and others scrape a Living. Society does nothing or very, very little to help them. If one tried to rationally teach them something, if they were sent to School of Home Economics together with the child, there would be a chance that later they could provide for themselves by taking domestic labour. The cost for education is quickly earned, if only a small number of women become self-supporting instead of a public burden” (Skals 1947:24-25 in Nissen 2016, condensed)



# Welfare Policies: Becoming an active working human being

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”This is about views on human beings. The Government will not take part in giving up people. Everybody should have a chance for a life with work. In addition when we know that people, who have been on social security for several years, are capable of working, they are not to be placed in a permanent passive form

support” (Minister of employment, Claus Hjort Frederiksen 2006:3)



# Management: Work as a gift – searching for potentialities

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“I want employees, who believe that human beings are capable of taking care of themselves and become active at the labour market. And you should not feel sorry for them. On the contrary, it is a gift. Everybody has a history. Earlier, you had this approach that you should dig down, stir up and work on the past. But I think this is wrong. Instead you should offer people some coping tools. People simply have to learn to handle their life as it is and as it has been” (Manager, Jobcenter, 2016, condensed)



# Social work: Another and broader form of subjectivity

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“Today I had this conversation with a woman with ADHD. She has suffered from so many defeats in her working life. The rehabilitation team has pointed out that it is important she gets support in her home, rest and structure in her life before we start talking about employment. But because of waiting lists, the support person has not been provided yet. So it becomes more and more expensive, and she gets more and more afraid of the labour market. She tells me: I don’t think, I am capable of anything anymore. And then we clientise a citizen” (Social worker, Jobcenter, 2016)



# Social Work: Believing social work is possible

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**Susanne:** The whole idea about network has swept over the social services for two reasons. 1. It is cheaper, and 2. There is no research saying that children get better by living in a foster family.

**Asger:** But it is also about believing this is possible, and luckily it turns out to be less expensive. Along with the Purchaser-supplier-model, one could see that it only costs a tenth. I doubt it had gone so fast in Denmark, if it had been a little more expensive, just a little  
(Nissen 2017/2018)



# Humanism and solidarity vs. economic individualism

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**Katrine:** It is a trend that you should focus on the resources. There is a societal flow in this. Those who have resources should give something to those who have not. So I guess this is a change in our views on human beings. But you also have another trend saying people must fend for themselves indicating, it is their own fault if they are on social security. So, there is this human approach, and then there is the other: *Well they are on social security. It is their problem.*

**Maria:** So focusing on resources is not a withdrawal of help?

**Anne:** No! As if we had decided they must fend for themselves with their own resources? [Laughs] (Nissen 2017/2018)





# All human beings have resources if they are realised

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Apropos, views on human beings, previously, you lumped alcoholics, drug addicts and parents who had neglected their child together and said: They are simply damage goods. Now, it is also about saying that it is not necessarily so. It is another way of looking at people as being possible. That in fact, people want the best for the children, and I doubt this is what you actually thought some years ago. Previously one said, everybody want the best for their child, but is was just not good enough: *you cannot change!* Today we are human beings that can change if we get some help (Nissen 2017/2018)



# The productive social worker mobilising resources

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We get a report that mother beats her child. The police is involved but the mother is acquitted. But we need to find a temporary solution for the children. First step is to look for the biological father. They move to his place, but it doesn't work. The children aren't safe. We set up many meetings to find out what may help, and we try out several interventions, but it just doesn't work. And then we reach a point of no return, where we have to say: What now then? Nothing is possible. We decide to leave no stone unturned. We begin exploring the network: Who is a resource? And it is difficult. There is no suitable network. (Nissen 2017/2018)



# Mediating, creating mutual understanding and collective action

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“The tone in the public debate obviously means something for how people come to think about other people and in particular it means something for the most vulnerable people in society ... then we have to be a kind of mediators sometimes” (Local community worker, 2016)

“Our approach is that people have resources. When you do things together with different people resources appear that we couldn't see in advance, both to themselves and to us. They appear in meetings between different people, between different professionals, between residents living different places, between residents and different professionals” (Local community worker, 2016)



# What constitutes an alternative view on human beings?

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- Sensitive to vulnerabilities
- Making human resources visible
- Promoting the value of caring based on solidarity with those disadvantaged
- Translating simple views human beings into broader views
- Promoting other forms of subjectivity through knowledge about human life and through struggles for mobilising resources
- Mediating conflicts, creating mutual understanding and collective action
- **A reflection theory concerned with social problems** (Nissen 2010, 2014)



# What enables this reflection theory in practice?

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- A practical sociological sense of human life and suffering
- An capacity to mediate between various systems, fields and discourses, for the purpose of enhancing quality of life
- A reproduction of solidarity through collective action (Nissen 2015; Hagen 2006)



# Leaving people to fend for them selves?

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**A:** Is it okay for you?

**B:** As long as I don't smell

**A:** Okay. Then we will not do anything about it. How is it about getting something to eat and to drink?

**B:** 1 time every day I eat

**A:** Sometimes?

**B:** Well, like 1 time every day I drive to *Fakta* and then I buy a little. It is not like I don't have any food for several days. On the other hand, it is not like I get all the meals that people say you should have.

**A:** You know what, as long as it is okay for you, it is okay.

(Social worker and person with mental illness, 2016)



# Conceptual openness and searching for alternatives

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- Being aware of the various meanings of ‘floating signifiers’, even those that seem unquestionable (Laclau and Mouffe 1985)
- Allowing alternatives to appear through an openness towards different conceptions of the same problem (Luhmann 2000)
- Making a reflective break with our field of research (Bourdieu 1992) e.g. How *is* social work *possible*?



# In depth qualitative studies challenging our position

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- Empirical sensitivity to forms of knowledge and the purposes, distinctions, translations and languages in social work practice,
- Willingness to use this language as a source for theoretical reflection and formulation of alternatives
- Putting ourselves in the place of social workers





# Transcending, generalising and constructing

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- Transcending local forms of and institutionalised areas social work
- Looking for generalised forms of knowledge in social work
- Constructing reflection theories *making social work possible* by e.g.
  - Being sensitive to alternative forms of subjectivity
  - Exploring vulnerabilities and the forms and mechanism of solidarity

(cf. Hagen 1999;2006, Nissen 2010)



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