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Evaluation and the Organization of Social Work in the Public Sector

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**Background**

Evaluation/audit/assessment does not exist in a vacuum as a self-perpetual entity. In order to understand evaluation one has to understand the institutional context in which the organizations work. Evaluation is always conducted in organizations and by organizations. In this paper we will emphasize social work organizations as constituted by different domains: the political domain, the domain of administration and management and the domain of professional practice. These domains are, in turn, embedded in a domain of institutional conditions. This perspective entails certain consequences for the evaluation of such organizations.

Social Work in the different types of welfare states and definitely in the Nordic countries is conducted largely, but not entirely, in the context of politics-driven public organizations. It applies to social welfare agencies, public medical services, schools and employment agencies, but examples can be more, although the organizational principles may differ. Such organizations are typically described and understood as "administrations", and they are often portrayed in organizational charts with varying sets of formal roles, positions and functions that are coordinated to achieve the administration’s goals. It is also logical from this perspective that professional practitioners – in our case social workers – when they enter into this type of organization tend to be subsumed under administrative designations of the task. The situation means that social workers as professionals risk to merge with their role as part of the administration, that they will be "administrators of cases” rather than independent professional practitioners.

The everyday understanding of organizations for social work mentioned above is in fact very limited: 1) it is static in that it is about structure rather than process, 2) the political level is included to a small extent, 3) the professional component is diffuse and 4) the influence of the outside world is often not taken into account at all. According to the American sociologist W. Richard Scott (2003), this type of understanding was dominant even in organization theory until 1960, he talks about different forms of closed system models. Gradually, the criticism of the closed system thinking led to theories of organizations as open systems, which is the dominant view until today. It is based on the realization that organizations for their survival are dependent on the interaction and exchange with other systems in their environment. A typical exponent is neo-institutional organization theory, which arose from the mid 1970s. It highlights how organizations tend to adapt to prevailing institutional changes and expectations of the outside world.¹

Thus, understanding of evaluation of social work in public sector demands understanding of the mechanisms driving the organizations which conduct social work.

On the other hand we don’t know much about factors which determine both the use of evaluation and apparent trends in evaluation. Such trends include that during some periods of

time everything has to be evaluated whether during other periods evaluation is much less emphasized. The same applies to what methods of evaluation become “high fashion”. One can multiply similar examples:

- Some features, during specific periods of time, are considered to be worthy of evaluation while other features are not.
- The goals of evaluation are changing over time, which raises the question of who formulates the goals.
- How important the evaluation is considered to be at different institutional and organizational levels.

Hence there is a need for a theoretical approach explaining institutional and organizational conditions of social work in the public sector and by doing that shedding some light on evaluation of social work in the public sector.

The aim of this paper is to discuss – from a specific organizational theory perspective – evaluation of social work in the public sector. First we will comment briefly on the so called Nordic model in public administration and some previous research in the field. Thereafter we will outline a (preliminary) domain theory regarding the organizing of social work in the public sector. In this theoretical perspective is emphasized the relationship and dynamics between politics, administration and professional practice. Finally, we will discuss the implications regarding evaluation of social work in the public sector.

Some words about the specificity of the Nordic countries

Most European countries may to some extent be described as general welfare states, with a public sector in order to carry out social services. What is distinctive about the Nordic countries is the dominant role of national governments in the formation of social policy, and also the greater extent of the public sector. According to Christiansen, Petersen, Edling & Haave (2006), the shared core values of the so called Nordic Welfare Model have historical reasons: In general, the Nordic countries have been characterized by a) a long tradition of political democracy based upon a high degree of popular participation, b) respect for human rights and the rule of law, and c) a high standard of living and social equality. In analyzing the Nordic welfare model, Alestalo, Hort & Kuhnle (2009) conclude their findings in three master statements: 1. Stateness (The Nordic model is based on an extensive prevalence of the state in the welfare arrangements), 2. Universalism (In the Nordic countries the principle of universal rights is extended to the whole population), and 3. Equality (The historical inheritance of the Nordic countries is that of fairly small class, income and gender differences).

In spite of shared values and common traits, the Nordic countries also display significant differences regarding principles of governance. In two Nordic countries (Sweden and Finland) the state agencies and authorities are constitutionally guarantied independence from the government and in Sweden also from the parliament. Such independence is unique in modern states.

To summarize, although there are significant differences among the Nordic countries regarding economic and social models, they all share some common traits: a) universal coverage, b) financing through taxation, c) a dominant role played by the state, and d) decentralized services and a heavy reliance on the public sector for the provision of services. (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2007).
Previous research
Political science has since decades focused on the relationship between politics and administration in general, but the involvement of professional practice in this dynamics is usually not considered at all.

In a European context, the demarcation line between politics and public administration seems relatively stable. Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011) find that – despite the influence of New Public Management (NPM) during the last thirty years – the politics/administration frontier has not shifted very much in Germany and France. Neither in the Nordic countries or in the Netherlands has this borderline moved much. Even in Belgium and Italy, countries that have witnessed extensive political decentralization, Pollitt & Bouckaert (ibid., p. 167) see no clear evidence that this has much altered – at least not in a lasting way – the borderline between politics and administration.

There are of course also significant differences between states. On a general level, in modernizing and reforming the public sector, Pollitt & Bouckaert (ibid., p. 117) identify two groups of states – and a pattern. The first is what they call the core NPM group including countries like Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom and (partly) the USA. These are countries that all embrace the principles of NPM and “see a large role for private sector forms and techniques in the process of restricting the public sector” (p. 117). The second group includes “the continental European modernizers”: Finland, France, the Netherlands, Italy and Sweden. Even Belgium and Germany are included, if one goes below the federal level. These states continue, according to Pollitt and Bouckaert, “to place greater emphasis on the state as the irreplaceable integrative force in society”. An interesting distinction is – probably displaying different cultures – that the ‘northerners’ (like Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden) have given their modernization efforts a stronger citizen-orientated and participatory flavor than the central Europeans (like Belgium and Germany).

It is easy to agree with Guy Peters (2001, p. 173 f) when he concludes that it should be clear that the design and redesign of public administration – embedded as it is in politics and culture – is more than a technical exercise. He also states (p. 210) that “it is not useful to separate the political from the administrative in either real life or analyses”. What seems to be missing in current research, however, is the involvement and role of professional practitioners, e.g. social workers in a welfare administration.

Kouzes and Mico revisited
Already more than thirty years ago, James Kouzes and Paul Mico (1979) launched a domain theory for human service organizations in the United States. They made a distinction between the policy domain, the management domain and the service domain. These domains are considered to be not only different from each other, but also to be antagonistic to each other. Kouzes and Mico developed their theory primarily in order to better understand the conditions for activity development. The proposed theory contains several interesting features, to which we will return, but it also reveals at least three important limitations. 1) Kouzes’ and Mico’s theory is based in the research area of human service organizations (Human Service Organizations, HSO). The term refers to organizations for health care, education and social welfare in a broad sense. The service orientation that is considered to ”unite” these organizational areas, however, says very little about the relationship based interventions, sometimes against the individual’s own will, which are typical for social work (see Morén,
What we in the Nordic countries call public administration is in Kouzes’ and Mico’s model reduced to a question of leadership (management domain). In the service domain, there is no discussion of professions and that it might give the domain a special dignity. To these three constraints is added a fourth: Kouzes and Mico does not at all mention the way local organizations are affected and controlled by institutional conditions in society. That’s what we hereafter denote and develop as the domain of institutional conditions. Given these limitations, but inspired by Kouzes and Mico, we introduce a domain theory for the organization of social work in the public sector. The three domains – as well as the fourth – and their main characteristics are illustrated in figures 1 and 2. As will be discussed, this domain-perspective will in turn have implications on the way evaluations in this sector are formed.

The relationship between politics, administration and profession
Discussing the content of professionalism and the conditions for professional control in social work, the relationship between politics, administration and the profession appears as central. Public organizations for social work are typically politically controlled by a locally elected assembly, e.g. a social welfare board or a school board. The political level in its turn appoints a level of officials, an administration, with the task to implement interventions in order to assist people in vulnerable situations. Such an administration is usually composed of a top manager controlling sub-heads and workers at different levels and departments and social administrative support functions (Montin, 2007). The implementation of the mission of the administration – to assist vulnerable people in practice – is, however, dependent on the different professions that operate within the organization, such as social workers, psychologists, nurses and social care staff. Ideally professions have great autonomy in practice and are guided in their work by scientific and professional standards.

We can thus conclude that these public arenas for social work at the local level are constituted of three domains with different functions and features, yet interconnected and interdependent: the domain of politics, the domain of administration & management and the domain of professional practice. The task of politics is – based on different ideological positions – to be responsible for the overall government of the activity. The administration’s task is to maintain structure and management that ensures implementation of political decisions. The task of the professions is to – based on science and proven experience – carry out interventions in practice that improve people’s life situations or maintain necessary life functions. Between these domains, thus diverse in nature, there is a mutual influence: politics controls professional practice, via the administration, but at the same time professions (usually through the administration, but sometimes directly) influence the political domain. The three domains on the local level are, in turn, conditioned by the overall political and structural conditions in society – what we call the domain of institutional conditions. Figure 1 below illustrates schematically mutual communication and interaction between the different domains.

Three domains for the organization of social work
Politics and administration are relatively established concepts and arenas. Politics refers to the processes and decisions that distribute power, wealth and resources in the society.

2 In practice, the administration exists beforehand a given political election – but it is still mandated by politicians.
Administration refers to organization and functions set up to implement political decisions. What is meant by professional practice in social work is less clear. Uncertainty also prevails regarding how institutional conditions in society affect organizational forms and the content and carrying out of client work. In order to sort things out, we return to the relationship between politics, administration, professional practice and institutional conditions outlined above. What characterizes the different domains and what is specific about the domain of professional practice in relation to administration and politics? How is the local level conditioned by national (and international) institutional conditions? As will be shown, the discussion ends up in a preliminary domain theory of organizing social work in the public sector. This theory will in turn inform the way we set up evaluations in this sector.

**Figure 1:** Three domains (white) in local organizing of social work in public sector and the domain of institutional conditions.

Below is described the content and rationality of the tree local domains.

**THE DOMAIN OF POLITICS**
*Goal & ground for legitimacy:* General control and governance of the development of the society. Support and trust from different clusters of electorate.
*Principle of governance:* Ideology and electoral mandate.
*Criteria of success:* Fair redistribution.
*Structure:* Political representativity and participation.
*Way of working:* Voting and elections, negotiations and bargaining.

**THE DOMAIN OF ADMINISTRATION & MANAGEMENT**
*Goal & ground for legitimacy:* Implementation of political decisions concerning social welfare. To maintain rules and routines, legal certainty and to provide equal treatment of citizens. The ideal of the impartial public servant.
*Principle of governance:* Hierarchy, co-ordination and control.
Criteria of success: Cost-effectiveness.
Structure: Bureaucracy, vertical.
Way of working: Exercising public authority, formalized, line organization.

THE DOMAIN OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE
Goal & ground for legitimacy: To represent citizens and give voice (and help) to the individuals and groups in socially vulnerable situations. To work for improvement of citizen’s living conditions. Scientific knowledge and proven experience.
Structure: Collegial, horizontal, meritocracy.
Way of working: Client-oriented, relation-based, rooted in scientific knowledge and competence.

When it comes to social work in local social welfare agencies, it appears that it tends to be a fusion between the administrative domain and the professional domain. It often goes without saying that social workers’ – the professionals’ – work with clients is equated with welfare agency resources (in terms of administrative interventions). From figure 1 it can be argued that this prevailing approach in two respects is incomplete with regard to the organizational conditions for social work: 1) The political domain is severed and considered unimportant when it comes to understanding the organization’s functioning; the political domain is sited outside or above. 2) The professional domain is not considered as separate from the administration, which makes it difficult to perceive social work as a professional practice.

There is also in figure 1 a noticeable lack of contextualization of the local level, which we remedy by inserting the fourth domain – the domain of institutional conditions (figure 2).

The domain of institutional conditions
The domain of institutional conditions is constituted by different types of institutions on several levels in society. Most of these institutions are concrete, tangible and formal organizations. At the same time they are creators, carriers and mediators of an immaterial structure regarding prevailing ideas in society about the way social services should be governed and organized. Institutions may differ in kind between countries, but stated in principle it is generally about four types of institutions:

1 - Governmental (or state) agencies.
2 - National and regional boards and authorities.
3 - Associations of local (e.g. municipalities, districts, counties) public sector providers of social services and in some cases private providers working on behalf of the local public sector.
4 - Associations of professionals. In same cases/countries such associations are very powerful (e.g. National Association of Social Workers – world’s largest association for social workers).

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3 It is also obvious that the domain of professions is directly linked to the domain of institutional conditions. Social work is, at least as we understand it in the Nordic countries, basically carried out as a societal assignment to assist citizens in vulnerable life situations. Professional work may be carried out in local organizations, but its assignment still basically emanates from the institutional domain.
Institutions of type 3 and to some extent 4 are what Ahrne & Brunsson (2008) denote as meta-organizations, i.e. rather than individuals they have other organizations as their members. Consequently their raison d'être is to have an own agenda that only partly mirrors the interests of the members. Meta-organizations which are too close to their members tend to cease to exist. The same is true if such organizations are too different from their member organizations. All four types of institutions have to be seen as relatively independent agents or actors in relation the three domains depicted previously in the article.

The domain of institutional conditions could be looked upon as a canvas of a painting. Beholders usually do not bother about canvases, they look at the surfaces. Nevertheless the painting depends to a very large extent on its canvas, both technically and esthetically.

Below is illustrated the domain of institutional conditions in terms of task and logic. It is important to note that this domain is of a different character compared to the ”local” domains described above. Institutional conditions in the community are supported by formal structures and central institutions, but are also about immaterial structures and a continuous flow of ideas regarding how welfare in society should be organized. Structure and flow of ideas are mutually interdependent. One can compare with the way the Internet works: there is basically a technical structure, but what is interesting is the constant flow of information and communication made possible by this structure and which has a significant impact on people’s everyday lives. One may ask: What is it – in terms of recommended knowledge and prevailing ideas – that at a certain time is ”available on the net” regarding institutional governance of local organizations for social work?

Let us give an example. In his influential book The Audit Society (1997), Michael Power describes how the concept ”audit”, with its origins in economic revisions in private companies, from the late 1980s came to be widely spread and used even within the public sector. This phenomenon was noticed first in Great Britain, but later on even in many other countries. In this process, the meaning of the concept changed and came to signify a growing idea in society that public sector organizations are ”auditable”; they can and will be continuously controlled by measuring performance. This is an example of an institutionally sanctioned idea about the management and control of organizations that has prevailed ”on the net” for more than twenty years now.

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| **Constituted by:** Partly formal structures aimed at overall management and control of the societal organization of welfare. Partly immaterial structures in terms of culture, opinions and norms in society about how welfare should be organized. More specifically, it is a question of dominant socio-political currents and prevailing policy and knowledge ideals (which often consist of international influences).

Institutional basis: Central institutions in society, such as State agencies and boards and different associations of providers and practitioners.

Legitimacy basis of institutions: Legitimated partly politically through national elections, and partly |
through central institutions’ and interest groups’ different missions.

**Work mode/logic:**
- Formal governance through directives, evaluation and control
- Dissemination and legitimization of certain prevailing ideas
- "Remote control" exercised via locally internalized self-control (see advanced liberalism, described below)

**Criteria of success:** Compliance from local organizations towards the prevailing ideology and directives at the national level.

**Figure 2: The domain of institutional conditions and its specific content and logic.**

Within neo-institutional organizational research (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) focus is on how organizations are affected and shaped by institutional factors in the environment in a broad sense. This may involve e.g. political decisions, legislation or prevailing currents of opinion and ideals that create institutional requirements that local organizations tend to adapt to. The emphasis therefore is on the process and not on the structure (Grape, Blom & Johansson, 2006). It is reasonable to assume that what happens in this "institutional domain", which in a somewhat ambiguous way is located at the national (and even international) level, will affect the relationship between the other domains (politics, administration and profession) at the local level. When we talk about the domain of institutional conditions, we do not include all possible contextual factors, but assume a narrower meaning: we refer mainly to the governance of organizations for social work in the public sector emanating from the central institutions in society, including diffusion and legitimization of dominant ideas and ideals – often global in character – about how these organizations should be organized and managed.

The domain of institutional conditions sometimes is materialized into a single organization – such as a State agency or board or an association of public providers regarding norms and guidelines – but it’s also about structures in society that can be difficult to observe, but which nevertheless have an impact on single local organizations. It may for example be difficult to "see" the impact that makes the vast majority of local organizations for social services in Sweden more or less specialized (Lundgren, Blom, Morén & Perlinski, 2009). There are no central directives or guidelines demanding this development – yet it occurs. We therefore talk of a domain of institutional conditions – thus including immaterial structures as well as these structures materialized in central organizations in a particular field.

Similarly, social welfare as well as health care may be seen as institutions in society. The numerous single hospitals and health care centers have of course their internal organization and management, but this local level is in turn influenced by central organizations (e.g. a National Board of Health and Welfare and various evidence-producing organizations) and structures in society (e.g. prevailing ideals regarding how to value and control health care). In a health care study by Hasselbladh, Bejeroth and Gustavsson (2008), it is shown with clarity how structural impacts may be difficult to observe – but still be very powerful. In order to capture the logic of the new type of management in health care settings, the authors use the
concept advanced liberalism, coined by Rose (1999). This refers on the one side to an expectation that individuals, collectives and organizations are expected to take responsibility in shaping their activities on the basis of self-reflection and assessment, and on the other side that this “freedom” is not intended to autonomy but to involve individuals, collectives and organizations in the continuous evaluation and control of their own actions. This link between the domain of institutional conditions and the local domains is subtle but powerful: advanced liberalism works – like a remote control – through individuals and collectives’ (e.g. professions) own subjective motivations and preferences – rather than openly controlling them.\(^4\) Social work in health care settings – in their local form – is thus also affected by what is happening in health care as an institution in society.

A typical mode of control emanating from the domain of institutional conditions may be the requirement of a specific kind of evaluation, for example the use of randomized controlled trials (RCT) as part of the idea of Evidence Based Practice (EBP) or instructions from the administration that professionals should adhere to certain manuals based on quality registers. Another mode of control may be making evaluations mandatory even if the consequence should be relocation of organizational resources from the core activities to evaluation and audit.

Implications for evaluation

The influence of the domain of institutional condition can be conceptualized in terms of culture, in the sociological meaning of the word, as a societal dimension providing ideas and values which make the world meaningful. Sociologist usually distinguish three functions of culture: 1) it tells us how the world looks like, 2) it provides the distinctions between good and bad, wright and wrong, 3) it provides expressivity which tells us what is desirable versus undesirable, necessary (should) versus expression of individual will. As Ahrne et al. (1996) put it through “It is not necessarily good that culture makes our world meaningful. The creation of meaning may also be done by concerning things as evil or chaotic.” (Author’s translation) (Ahrne et al. 1996).

Let us, from the perspective of the above outlined domain theory, highlight and consider some aspects linked to the evaluation of social work in public organizations.

- Evaluation is often linked to set of goals at different levels, both in society and in particular organizations. The domain perspective makes it easier to be aware of the differences between political, administrative and professional goals.

- The influence of institutional conditions on evaluation modes. Evaluations are seldom entirely in the hand of local actors. Instead they are conditioned by the political and administrative domains and shaped by the institutional conditions.

- The goals for evaluation may not be compatible with the goals of the organization to be evaluated. The domain of institutional conditions generates goals according to its own logic. Therefore there is a risk that organizations are evaluated in irrelevant aspects.

\(^4\) This view is closely related to Foucault’s concept governmentality (see e.g. Lemke, 2007).
– It is extremely rare for social workers to be supervised by managers within their own professional domain. The fact that managers are not professional social workers may have serious impact on evaluation. There is always a risk that evaluation is undertaken for other reasons than the needs of the professionals, in the worst case completely ignoring the needs of the professionals or putting an administrative burden on the shoulders of profession. There is also a risk of demanding from the professionals continuous (during performance of a task) evaluation of their work. Given unchanged amount of resources this will directly hinder the professionals in performing their work. To put it through brutally, evaluation instead of work.

– The actual work management at the local level is probably also influenced and controlled by prevailing ideals in the domain of institutional conditions regarding the way human service activities should be evaluated and controlled. This includes, as mentioned previously, e.g. ideas of continuous auditing and monitoring of organizations’ performance, an expression of the so-called audit society (see Power, 1997).

– The concept of the domain of institutional conditions helps us to understand the explosion of audit and evaluation in the public sector. The current trend seems to be that “we evaluate whether it is necessary or not because everybody else does”.

Concluding comments
In this paper, we present – from a Nordic perspective – a preliminary domain theory on the organizing of social work in the public sector. The domain theory highlights the way social workers’ professional practice is conditioned and shaped by politics and administration in organizations of social work at the local level, but also how this local process is conditioned and controlled by overall institutional relationships in society. The division in different but interdependent domains also sheds some new light on important evaluation issues in this field.

Politics, administration and professional practice are guided and justified by different rationales. Roughly expressed: ideology, effectiveness and quality in client work respectively. This makes it important in public sector evaluations to be aware of different”domain perspectives” on the local level in planning and carrying out evaluations. It is also important to consider that the way evaluations are carried out and formed at the local level always to some extent is influenced by current ideas and ideals in the domain of institutional conditions.
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