

Scientific meeting

SOCIAL WORK AS ACTION SCIENCE

An international comparison on epistemological positions

8 November 2024, 8h30-16h

Format hybrid: Room 2.310, Breguet 2, 2000 Neuchâtel



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- Kris Clarke, University of Helsinki
- Annamaria Colombo, HES-SO Fribourg
- Emmanuel Jovelin, CNAM, Paris
- Amélie Maugère, University of Montreal
- Peter Sommerfeld, FHNW, Olten
- Bettina Voelter, ASH, Berlin

REGISTRATION



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Social work can be considered as action-oriented discipline. Yet the meaning and the implementation of such an affirmation needs to be questioned as it depends on traditions of specific language- and approach-based scientific communities and on historical as well as socio-and geopolitical positions. The scope of the scientific meeting is to explore and discuss different epistemological positionings, along four criteria: the character of the scientific premise; the object of social work; the connection between theory and practice; the normative character of the position.

The question of how to think about the discipline of social work also implies the formal constitution of a discipline based on university chairs, various fields of research and practice, as well as a collectivity of scholars. Certain experts consider the academic development of social work as the prototype of an innovative way of conceiving a discipline: The discipline is based on the diversification of fields of social action, but also of conceptual and methodological approaches as the subject of disciplinary debates. It further connects research with practice and models of intervention for essential social work knowledge. Finally, different types of knowledge and skills are valued.

This way to discuss social work enables the participants to perceive how the international definition of social work and the orientation of the discipline as one of action are making headway. Above all, it illustrates how social work itself defines what constitutes relevant knowledge for its own field. It will become visible, how much, drawing on a culture of dialectical discussion, a critical and challenging view of society and appropriate interventions, social work can also retain its militant character beyond professional narcissism.

PROGRAM

8h30 – 9h00

Welcome

9h00 – 10h30

Amélie Maugère, School of Social Work, Université de Montréal
Social work as a discipline: does its project of knowledge and praxis really support emancipation?

Kris Clarke, University of Helsinki
Embracing Radical Hope from a Social Work Perspective

11h00 – 12h30

Emmanuel Jovelin, CNAM, Paris
The challenges of a humanities and social sciences-social work discipline in France

Bettina Voelter, Alice Salomon Hochschule, Berlin
Professional social work as conflict management. Developing methods of dialogue against polarisation

14h00 – 15h30

Annamaria Colombo, HES-SO, School of Social Work Fribourg
Social work, an academic discipline at the service of social justice. A contribution to the debate based on French-language literature

Peter Sommerfeld, FHNW, School of Social Work, Olten
Modelling the (Action) Science and Profession of Social Work as structurally coupled systems

Amélie Maugère is a professor at the School of Social Work at the Université de Montréal (UdeM) since 2015. After studying law and political science, she completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Centre International de Criminologie Comparée (UdeM). The social control of intimacy (sex) and poverty, rationalities and normativities in society, institutions and science are at the center of her empirical research. Her current contributions to reflection on the theoretical status of the discipline of 'social work' draw on her expertise in social science epistemology and case analysis.

Social work as a discipline: does its project of knowledge and *praxis* really support emancipation?

The public and private health and social services network is the main employer of social workers (SW). Their interventions are deeply dependent on the hierarchy of values as well as the choice of standards and targets of public action, particularly those of the social protection system.

For more than thirty years, academic literature has explained the identity malaise of SW by the neoliberal turn of the State: privatization of social services, New Public Management, criminalization of poverty, etc. This explanation is valid; however, *just because this is that doesn't mean that is only that*.

Our contribution to the debate on the theoretical status of social work as a discipline is based on the theoretical approach proposed by Alvaro P. Pires (1995) to delimit the boundaries of criminology. From this theorization, we propose another way of understanding the identity malaise of SW.

In this presentation, we will revisit the four concepts that allows us to describe the particular project of social work as a discipline: the object (1), the activity of knowledge (2), the field of study (3) and the praxis (4) (Maugère, 2023). Then, we will show how the concepts of “system of thought” and “battle of rationalities” (Foucault, 1969; 1976) help us to observe “how social work observes reality”. Finally, we will indicate – and without claiming to be exhaustive – some avenues that can be taken within our discipline to support individual and collective aspirations for emancipation.

Kris Clarke is a professor of Social Work in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki. Professor Clark research has evolved from multicultural social work and care in the field of HIV towards themes related to decolonization, abolitionist social work and the social memory of HIV/AIDS. And her research interests center on decolonization, structural social work, abolitionist perspectives on social work, as well as social memory.

Embracing Radical Hope from a Social Work Perspective

The world is in flames: hatred, violence, expulsion, impunity, and dehumanization seem to be the prevailing political responses to conflict. Unsettling taken-for-granted

ways of thinking grounded in coloniality requires an examination of ourselves and our own positionality and relationship to power structures, colonialism, and diverse local histories. Those who question or present alternative views often find themselves silenced, mocked, beaten, or exiled. This playback loop of invasion, exploitation, displacement, elimination, land appropriation, and environmental degradation grinds on in the 21st century, much as it has since European invaders arrived on the distant shores of Turtle Island, Uthuru, Aotearoa, Sápmi, Tawantinsuyu, and countless other places in pursuit of gold and conquest.

This presentation seeks to reimagine the future of social work through the notion of radical hope. Rebecca Solnit considers radical hope as an embrace of the unknown to conquer despair and defeatism. As Solnit states: “In the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act.” Living in conditions where the dread of environmental collapse, war, extreme inequality, and the rule of artificial intelligence algorithms looms large, how do we -- as social workers -- marshal concrete ways of contributing to socially just futurities? In recent years, political polarization has created contentious and toxic debates on the very worthiness of diverse human beings, especially those living precarious lives through economic or sociopolitical marginality. Social workers have a key role to play in challenging structures of oppression and asserting the fundamental dignity of human beings through their professional insight and skill. This presentation ponders how to build on the critique of colonialism in social work because aspirations to decolonize the profession intrinsically involve a future-orientation.

Emmanuel Jovelin has been appointed University Professor at the University of Lorraine, and Director of the Lorraine Social Sciences Laboratory. He holds the chair of social work and social intervention at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM/Paris). He was a member of the Conseil national des universités, section 19 for 6 years and vice-president of the Association pour la recherche interculturelle (ARIC) based in Fribourg, Switzerland. For ten years he chaired the Association française pour les formations universitaires en travail social (AFFUTS).

The challenges of a humanities and social sciences-social work discipline in France

The challenges of a social work discipline have been discussed for several years in the circle of social work insiders in France. Despite numerous debates, today we are still at the same point. The purpose of my intervention is to return to the issues of disciplinarization of a field lacking recognition. After having explained and discussed the notion of discipline by mobilizing certain reference authors, I take part of my contribution from the manifesto written with the committee of 13 on “the human and social sciences-social work discipline” and then give the reasons for which, discipline is necessary in the field of social intervention. Finally, the general conclusion takes up

the objectives set out by the committee of 13 in the manifesto: “for a human and social sciences-social work discipline”.

Bettina Voelter is a professor at the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences Berlin (ASH Berlin). She has a degree in political science, is a sociologist and systemic therapist, and teaches social work theory and methods. She became Vice-Rector for Research and Cooperation from 2014 to 2018 and finally Rector of the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences Berlin since 2018. Her main areas of research are Reconstructive Social Work and Mindfulness in Social Work.

Professional social work as conflict management. Developing methods of dialogue against polarisation

Social work must place polarisation and its dialogical treatment at the centre of academic education and professionalisation. Right-wing populism, anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism in particular pose new challenges for universities and practitioners.

Annamaria Colombo is a professor and researcher at the Fribourg University of Social Work, member of the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland (HES-SO). She holds a master's degree in social work from the University of Fribourg and a doctorate in urban studies from the University of Quebec in Montreal. Her main areas of research are urban and juvenile marginality and cohabitation in public spaces with marginalised populations.

Social work, an academic discipline at the service of social justice. A contribution to the debate based on French-language literature

This article provides an overview of the current debates in French-speaking countries on social work as an autonomous scientific discipline. Without claiming to be an exhaustive literature review, it offers a few keys to understanding the scientific, institutional and political issues at stake, based on the available French-language academic literature. In French-speaking academic circles, recognition of social work as an autonomous discipline varies greatly from region to region. Based on the cases of France, Quebec and French-speaking Switzerland, the regions that have produced the most academic literature on the subject, I argue that it is necessary to situate these debates in their respective historical and institutional contexts. Not only do these contexts color and influence the positions expressed in the debate, but they also have an influence on the very conditions of possibility for debate and the expression of different positions. However, beyond these local issues, it is possible to identify at least four transversal logics, which are as many answers to the question "Is/should social work constitute an autonomous scientific discipline?". These four logics are: social work does not need to be recognized as an autonomous scientific discipline; social work is a practical discipline; social work is an interdisciplinary

science; social work is a participatory science. I conclude with some proposals designed to open the way for joint reflection, beyond antagonisms and local particularities (without denying them). I argue in particular that social work needs to assert its identity as a discipline if it is to become a space for scientific dialogue in the service of social justice.

Peter Sommerfeld is a professor and researcher at the School of Social Work (FHNW/HSA). His research and teaching focus on the professionalisation of social work, social work theories (systemic theories), evidence-based social work, research-based practice development, social work in companies, social work in psychiatry and social work in prisons. A member of the Swiss Society for Social Work (SSST), he was its co-president from 2006 to 2015. He was also involved in setting up the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA), and has been a member of its steering committee since it was founded in 2012.

Modelling the (Action) Science and Profession of Social Work as structurally coupled systems

From my perspective, which will be introduced shortly, the question of whether Social Work should or could be considered a science is nonsensical if we claim Social Work to be a profession. Of course, Social Work can (and does) function as a "Proto-Profession," with its corresponding science operating as a "Proto-Science" or a field of observation by others. Therefore, the most relevant question is what form this science can or should take to best support the development of the profession and, consequently, best serve the needs of its users. Some epistemological statements will be necessary to establish a solid foundation for all further considerations.

In the main part of my contribution, I will develop a model of processing the Action Science of Social Work, based on the assumption that Science and Profession are structurally coupled, potentially leading to a mature form of both Science and Profession. The aim of this model is threefold: first, to elucidate what "structurally coupled" means when taken seriously; second, to demonstrate the fundamental working mode of Social Work as an Action Science; and third, to present for discussion the far-reaching consequences and possibilities that arise from such a conception.

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