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Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

Abstract   The aim of this article is to explore the intricate relations between objectivism, subjectivism, and constructionism. I explore the construction of social problems in everyday professional practice as a valuable source for addressing and reflecting on differences in perceptions of knowledge. Using data from a study of how Danish social workers perceive social problems, the article shows how social workers' perceptions of social problems reveal a sociological sense of social problems that renders possible both ontological assumptions, as well as epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist dimensions of social problems. The social workers are constructing a model of social problems and how they are reproduced, as well as epistemological reflections on the uncertainty of knowing the "reality" of social problems. Those constructions are not formulated strictly in line with scholarly approaches but rather stem from experiences of working with social problems. The article proposes that we can learn something from this in terms of *reimagining social constructionism*. I propose that *social constructionists* should cultivate a sociological sense of the practical perceptions and approaches to solve social problems in society.

Keywords   Social Problems; Social Work; Knowledge; Objectivism; Subjectivism; Constructionism

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Since early attempts to develop theories of social problems, the intricate relation between the objective and subjective dimensions of a social problem has been a recurring aspect of scholarly debates. For example, the subjectivist notion that *social problems are what people think they are* represented an attempt to deconstruct common-sense ontological assumptions of social pathology by addressing the processes and values contributing to the constitution of a social problem (Fuller 1938; Fuller and Meyers 1941a; 1941b). In opposition, this approach was criticized for a lack of reflection on the various objective social conditions and conflicts which influence the processes whereby something becomes defined as a social problem (Lemert 1951). Since then, theories of social problems have been characterized by a certain dichotomization (Nissen 2013a). Some approaches have been focusing primarily on the processes by which something is perceived and defined as a social problem (e.g., Becker 1963; 1966). Others have been focusing on the objective conditions leading to the emergence of social problems (e.g., Merton and Nisbet 1976).

This dichotomization was also at play in the 1980s debates on "ontological gerrymandering" (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985a; 1985b; Hazelrigg 1986). Those debates criticized social constructionism for making non-reflective lapses into realism. It was argued that all claims about reality, even if they are termed social constructions, are inevitably based on ontological assumptions. If social constructionists refuse to admit this basic premise, it would open for ontological gerrymandering, it was argued. Social constructionists would critically, but selectively claim something to be "constructed" dependent on their attitudes. From a constructionist point of view, it was argued that even if one is claiming to have an objective perception of how reality "really" is, this could still be perceived as a social construction: any statement takes place in a social world of various constructions of reality.

One can say this controversy represented a change in reflections on social problems, moving from an ontological dichotomy between subjectivism/objectivism to an epistemological reflection on how it is possible to study and make claims about reality at all. This reflection is inherent in processes of reflexive modernization where traditional world views are contested, urging us to ask not only what *is* but *how* something becomes "real" (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). By embracing and incorporating the relativity and risks of modern society, social constructionism offered strong potentials for critical analysis by analyzing *how* social problems are constructed through allegations (Spector and Kitsuse 1987). Since then, social constructionism has gradually developed into a variety of ways the construction of social problems can be studied as embedded in interactional, institutional, and wider contextual settings (Miller and Holstein 1993; Best 1995; 2001; 2004; 2008; Gubrium and Holstein 2008). However, recently, the potentials of social constructionism have been questioned. Can social constructionist analysis actually contribute to understanding how social problems can be solved? Does social constructionism hold potentials for critical analysis that captures the practical problems of solving social problems? Such questions have been framed as "moving beyond social constructionism"—the theme of the 2013 annual meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (Dello Buono 2013). The epistemological controversies of the 1980s have been revitalized, but from a practical point of view. There is no single answer to those questions, but it might be possible to explore them. As already recognized by social constructionists, the precondition to developing analysis and theories of social problems are endeavors to transcend differences in perceptions of knowledge (Best 2004).

The aim of this article is to encourage such explorations that can contribute to reflection on the intricate

Maria Appel Nissen

Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

relation between objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism for the purpose of developing social constructionism. Using an example of how Danish social workers perceive social problems, my ambition is to illustrate such an exploration, and some reflections it might invite. By merging social constructionism with a sociological understanding of social workers' knowledge of social problems, as well as with the idea of "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959), the construction of social problems in everyday professional practice is explored and recognized as a valuable source for addressing and reflecting on the problem of transcending different perceptions of knowledge. I call this everyday construction *the sociological sense of social problems in social work*.

The basis for this exploration are three qualitative studies of Danish social work and social workers primarily in child welfare and employment services.[1] By reanalyzing the statements of social workers and managers with social work backgrounds, this article finds that the sociological sense of social problems in social work constructs at least three different forms of knowledge of social problems: 1) an *ontological model* of social problems referring to both *subjectivist, objectivist, and social constructionist* assumptions, including 2) a model of *how social*

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problems are reproduced, and finally 3) *an epistemological reflection on the uncertainty of understanding and explaining social problems adequately* from any point of observation. As such, a major point of this article is that social workers' perceptions of social problems reveal a sociological sense of social problems that renders possible both ontological assumptions, as well as epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist dimensions of social problems. I will conclude by considering what we might learn from this in terms of *reimagining social constructionism*. I will propose that *social constructionists* should cultivate a sociological sense of the practical perceptions and approaches to solve social problems in society. Those perceptions are not formulated strictly in line with scholarly approaches, but stem from experiences of working with social problems. A cultivation of such experiences does not presuppose "moving beyond social constructionism," but might move social constructionism further into a reflection on different perceptions of social problems.

The Sociological Sense of Social Problems as a Form of Practical Knowledge

In this article, I assume that by studying social workers' perceptions of social problems social constructionists can obtain knowledge that can work as a valuable source for addressing, reflecting on, and eventually transcending different perceptions of knowledge about social problems. What are the grounds for this assumption?

Social work emerged on the basis of both everyday experiences of social disorder, as well as strong ref-

erences to sociological and psychological knowledge (Philp 1979). In scholarly debates, sociology and social work have been perceived as having a "lifelong" relation constituted by a common interest in social problems (e.g., Klein 1931; Kahn 1957; Lindesmith 1960; Sussman 1964; Kallen, Miller, and Daniels 1968; Shaw 2009). My assumption is therefore that social workers' perceptions of social problems are grounded in both a common-sense understanding of reality gained from working with and among people suffering from or identified as social problems (Schütz 1972), as well as the institutionalized, generalized, and abstract forms of knowledge of social reality constructed in society (Berger and Luckman 1966). This means that when studying social workers' perceptions, we are likely to discover a particular form of practical knowledge grounded in both everyday experiences, as well as institutionalized perceptions. I call this practical form of knowledge *the sociological sense of social problems in social work*, emphasizing how it is based on common-sense knowledge deriving from both doing social work with social problems and from sociological knowledge of social problems. This particular form of knowledge might refer to sociological theory or concepts. However, it more likely appears as more informal understandings and explanations of social problems that contribute to the construction of a model of the world.

Social work is characterized by a strong orientation towards people's life worlds, and social workers' purpose for analyzing social problems differs from that of science (Lorenz 2006; Parton and Kirk 2010). In social work, conducting analysis and constructing knowledge of social problems are primarily

done for the purpose of being able to act and promote well-being, social change, and so on. This "attachment" to trying to solve social problems in society makes a difference in the way reality is approached. In general, actors producing knowledge refer to different systems of meaning, including different understandings and explanations of what is a problem to be solved. Thus, problem identification and problem solution are perceived and made sense of differently (Luhmann 1995). In science, the problem of finding solutions to social problems can be distributed to the environment: Scientists (including social constructionists!) are not expected to produce solutions and evaluate how they might have consequences. They see their task as producing knowledge about social problems, while leaving it to society—politicians or social workers—to act (Nissen 2010). In contrast, the need to evaluate actions and solutions is an integrated aspect of social work practice (Payne 2005).

Professional knowledge is thus related to, but is genuinely different from, knowledge in science, one of the main differences being the professional orientation towards knowledge for solving practical problems (Kirk and Reid 2002; Von Oettingen 2007). Neither social work nor social problems "behave" strictly in accordance with scholarly approaches, which means that solving social problems often requires a combination of approaches. Because social workers occupy this position of experiencing and practically trying to solve social problems as real human troubles, it is likely we can learn from their knowledge. We might discover more pragmatic and therefore less dogmatic ways of perceiving social problems, constructions which transcend

Maria Appel Nissen

Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

dichotomies related to objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism *because* they are not embedded in scientific controversies but in a practical context. Of course, this requires that we recognize how sociology is dependent on everyday concepts (Giddens 1990), and how we might learn something from the forms of knowledge constructed in society (Lee 1954; 1986; Wardell and Zajicek 1995; Mesny 1998). It requires sociological practice maintaining a dialogue with the manifold forms of knowledge in society, constantly questioning whether the way we perceive social problems is actually capturing the complexity of social life (Mills 1959).

In sum, the sociological sense of social problems in social work is a form of professional knowledge referring to both common-sense and practical *everyday knowledge,* as well as institutionalized forms of knowledge including knowledge adopted from *sci-*

ence. It is a form of knowledge shaped by and contributing to the construction of certain approaches to *problem identification* and *problem solution* involving *understandings* and *explanations* of social problems, as well as practical reflections on *practical problems* and *potentials* related to solving social problems. Using this practical form of knowledge as a source for reflecting on and addressing sociological problems is valuable: we can learn how social problems are perceived in a more pragmatic and therefore less dogmatic way. This might open for ways of developing *existing, as well as new theoretical approaches* within social constructionism. This approach is summed up in the scheme below, and underpins the following exploratory analysis. The analytical question is: *Is there a sociological sense of social problems in social work, and if so—how does this relate to scholarly controversies on the perception of social problems?*

Table 1. Analysis of the identification and solution to social problems as complex phenomena. [2]

Analytical Concepts	Exploratory Questions
(a) Everyday knowledge/science	What forms of knowledge are in use in the identification and solution to social problems?
(b) Problem identification/problem solution	How is something identified as a social problem that should be solved and how is it solved?
(c) Understandings/Explanations	What understandings and explanations are inherent in the identification and solution to social problems?
(d) Practical problems/potentials	What problems and potentials for problem identification and solutions derive from the above knowledge of social problems?
(e) Existing theory/development of new theory	How can answers to the above questions be reflected theoretically as a problem of existing theories, as well as a source for theory development?

[2] This table is developed on the basis of Nissen 2013a and 2013b, both addressing the need to develop the sociology of social problems to respond more adequately to social work and the challenges of solving social problems collectively in society.

Society as a Context: The Conditions and Constructions of Social Problems

When social workers reflect on their work, what they do, and what knowledge is important when working with concrete instances of social problems, they emphasize the importance of knowing about and being able to act within a complex context, which in the widest sense is perceived as "the world."[3] A social work manager says that this is because social work is situated in a "world constantly changing."

When social workers reflect on this world, they speak of, for example, "prevailing ideologies," "views on human nature," what "society wants" and "feels obliged to do" as socially constructed conditions that affect the possibility of solving social problems. For example, social workers working with unemployed people say:

> We have this mix of demands built in the legislation, and they are different depending on what groups of unemployed we are talking about, and in terms of ethics and the prevailing ideology, no doubt there has been a paradigmatic shift. (social work manager, employment services [2])

> Focus is changing towards getting as many unemployed people as possible through the machinery. Quantity is valued more than quality … It is about getting as many as possible through the system [to meet economic incentive structures]. The faster they get out the door, the

[3] In the following analysis, words in quotation marks are expressions used by the social workers exemplifying more general perceptions of social problems.

better. Instead of asking: *Do we act and help the citizen in a good way?* But, measuring the latter is more difficult. (social worker, employment services [2])

It is a scary view on human nature lying behind the political idea of giving economic reimbursement to the municipalities for getting more people into the job market. You don't think of the individual human being [who is not capable of working] at all. (social worker, employment services [2])

One can say social workers construct an ontological model seeing society as a construction of conditions, ideas, and views on human nature, altogether influencing the goals of society, as well as the inclination and incentives to act upon social problems. Inherent in this ontological model held by social workers is an idea of how ideologies and views on human nature are susceptible to social forces. As stated above, the prevailing paradigm for solving social problems can change.

When speaking of conditions, social workers emphasize *economy* and *politics* as two spheres in society having objective consequences. The economy and mechanisms of the market affect the job market, as well as the economy of ordinary citizens by having an "immense impact on the possibilities of the making of everyday life," as one social worker puts it. In addition, the political climate and the shaping of policies through legislation have an equal impact on "how money is allocated for welfare." One can say that social workers' ontological model of society points out economy and politics as two significant spheres of society conditioning how it is possible to promote welfare.

Maria Appel Nissen

Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

When reflecting on *how* economy and politics have an impact on social work and the ability to solve social problems, social workers speak about what can be termed *power relations* and *forms of regulation*. A social work manger expresses this implicitly by asking: "Who decides the development of society?" "What kind of behavior does one want to regulate?" Social workers experience this in very concrete ways as changes in expectations for productivity and efficiency:

> If people still want a welfare society and a welfare state, they have to hold on to the social workers and the people who are actually working with and providing a safety net for the citizens … Too many social workers bend their heads, or try to save their own skins, because they are too busy, and it is a shame. Instead, someone should examine the work and say: *Can it be true that everything should be calculated and quantified? And is it OK for each social worker to have 45 child welfare cases?* (social worker, child welfare services [2])

> When we took our first step as social workers in the social service department, we had a lot of contact with the citizens. This was what it was all about. Of course, we also made records. Today, things are diametrically the opposite. We actually run the whole company without meeting the citizen. There is not much dialogue. It is a very formal way of working with many administrative procedures. (social work manager, employment services [2])

Social workers' evaluation of the adequacy of resource allocation seems dependent on how it is possible to work with social problems in practice. They believe resource allocation should be based on solidarity and complex in-depth knowledge of social problems and how to solve them. They do not believe that allocation of resources should be based on performance measurement and assumptions that social problems can be solved in the same way that a "company" produces quantifiable things on the basis of standardized procedures. Social workers relate variations in how resources are allocated to the support for the welfare state and the willingness to put resources into social welfare:

> We have a government and prime minister who want to break down social reproduction, and this is what every government has wanted for a long time. There has just not been the willingness to put resources into it. (social worker, employment services [2])

According to social workers, the amount of and ways of allocating resources have an impact on the life situation and troubles of clients:

> The clients can be very aggressive because each and every one who could be squeezed into the job market is now employed. And right now, we are dealing with those with huge barriers [for getting into the job market], and it didn't take long before I was subject to the first threat from a client. I had to close my door and sit by myself for the rest of the day, fearing he would come back. Over time, you get more thick-skinned. (social worker, employment services [2])

> Quite often, aggressive behavior among unemployed people on social welfare is actually about human beings who just feel they haven't been heard and seen. They feel that someone is cracking the whip over them. If you already have a lot of problems, maybe abuse, maybe you have just gotten out of prison, maybe you have psychological problems—evidently you tend to have a quick temper. (social worker, employment services [2])

Just as social workers explain how the society's economy has an impact on the everyday lives of individuals, they tend to explain "problematic" behavior of individuals by certain "conditions," as the statements above exemplify. Social workers are reluctant to understand and explain social problems as "deviant behavior." One can say that their ontological model emphasizes both the interconnections and discrepancies between objective conditions and social constructions affecting the institutional preconditions for allocating welfare. What could be perceived as deviant behavior is explained by these interconnections and discrepancies (cf. Merton 1938).

In sum, social workers' perceptions of social problems reveal an ontological model of society as a world of both symbolic and objective conditions, as well as social forces contributing to the emergence of social problems. This holds both on the level of society, as well in the lives of ordinary citizens. Social workers explain social problems by the complex constitution of and relations between different spheres in society, in particular economy and politics, power relations, and the policies and regulations of social work, which influence the capacity to understand, explain, and solve social problems. A recurring theme among social workers is the support for the welfare state and the allocation of ever scarcer resources for social welfare. Seen from this point of view, a social worker points out that social work is not about "saving the world": it is a "tiny pawn" in society.

The Reproduction of Social Problems

The ontological model of social problems among social workers could be criticized for not taking into account individual variations in behavior, as well as the influence of smaller groups (cf. Sutherland 1947). In the light of this, it is worth noting that social workers do not ignore how social problems are also related to subjective preferences. However, when speaking about individual preferences, they often note that what might *appear* to be individual actually is attached to wider social conditions in society. Human beings are individuals *within* a society. Working with social problems on the micro-level requires an understanding and explanation of how "the situation of people is influenced by the conditions under which they live" and of how "human beings develop," a social worker says. This is a complex task since even though human lives are influenced by various social conditions, there is no simple causal explanation for why some people's lives become troublesome. As one social worker says, "Even people who are apparently well-functioning, are well educated, and so on can be troubled." According to another, people from "all classes in society" can suffer because life is "unpredictable" and "can develop in an awry way."

When social workers speak about personal problems, they draw on an explanatory model suggesting a *reproduction of social problems*. Conditions at the macro-level of society create problems, which might be distributed to the micro-level, where

Maria Appel Nissen

Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

social problems appear as, and can be reproduced as, personal troubles. For example, social workers speak about social expectations within a capitalist society where consumerism and expectations towards educational and work performance are high. A social worker says: "if society continues to develop as it does, problems will continue and exacerbate." According to another, people live in a society where "the pressure is much higher than before." Under such conditions, "social events" such as unemployment, family conflicts, divorce, disease or death have a strong impact. Social workers believe that some individuals suffer from social and emotional strains, which can eventually become so burdensome that they suffer from social and psychological deprivation.

In relation to this, social workers speak of "less ordinary forms of living" characterized by lack of norm regulation, instability, poor self-esteem, and distrust in others, which can eventually lead to violations of both the self and of others. A condensation of case records in social work with families illustrates how this is viewed as a consequence of social reproduction involving social and psychological deprivation:

> In case records, it is noted that severe family problems are related to the parents being the bearer of social reproduction such as low educational level, limited work experience, economic problems, marital problems, and housing problems—this often gender related. Social reproduction is considered being about having limited possibilities for and experiences of living the good life. In the case records, it is noted that the parents experience a life of hardship, adversity,

and of disfavor. This is related to an accumulation of individual problems such as substance or alcohol abuse, poor health conditions, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and various psychological problems. It is noted that some individuals have a lifelong experience of problems going back to early childhood—conflicts, domestic violence, drinking problems, sexual abuse, sickness and death, family breakup, changing or unstable schooling, bullying, et cetera. They feel as if they are carrying a weight on their shoulders, sometimes related to a lifelong feeling of neglect and exploitation. As a consequence, they feel distrust in other people, shame, and develop few or unstable social relations. Some parents feel anxious or worn out emotionally. It is noted that some have tried to commit suicide. (condensation of case records made by the author during field work [1])

This adds complexity to the ontological model of social problems. The relation between social conditions, the construction of social expectations, and the subjective dimension of social problems is not simple or predictable. People are different and have different resources; this has an impact on the strengths and capacities for mastering life expectations. When seeking to solve social problems as they appear and have consequences in the lives of individuals, social workers speak about the need to have a "wide" and "deep" knowledge of human life. According to these workers, human life is influenced by various social and psychological conditions and processes, each and together conditioning how human beings develop differently:

> It is important to know something about human beings in society, to have knowledge about social sci-

ence. In addition, it is important to know something about human development, psychology because it is important to be able to see human beings as a whole. (social work manager, child welfare services [2])

Efforts to solve social problems must be based on complex understandings and explanations of such conditions and processes.

The Uncertainty of Solving Social Problems

Because the ontological model of social problems among social workers is based on a complex understanding of social problems and how they are reproduced unpredictably, problem solution becomes shrouded with uncertainty. Thus, ontological assumptions do not necessarily exclude sensitivity towards relativity and risks in modern society. Experiencing the multi-causality of social problems creates an undeterminable space—when it comes to both knowing about and acting upon social problems. One might say that this undeterminable space refers to an epistemological problem: the problem of knowing and acting adequately upon a "reality" of social problems. A social worker reflects on this problem:

> The purpose of what we are doing we need to hold on to this and construct it. It is very much about the child and believing that what we are doing is a help: that the child will not be harmed or will not be able to attach to anyone. In reality, we have social inequalities related to class and unfairness. And the public welfare system cannot compensate. (social work manager, child welfare services [1])

This short statement reflects how social problems are "in reality" problems related to social inequality and unfairness. It also reflects how a public welfare system cannot fully compensate for this, which makes it necessary to construct the value of trying to solve social problems. Finally, the statement reveals how ontological assumptions are not tantamount to an absence of an epistemological reflection about how social problems are constructed. In fact—and this is worth noting—there is an appreciation that constructions are necessary ("we need to hold on to this and construct it"), not only because of the uncertainty in actually *knowing* whether a social problem is ontologically real but because of the uncertainty related to *being a part of a society*, where one is obliged to act upon social problems. This reflection on the social construction of social problems is not a reflection of a "social constructionist" but of a social worker trying to construct the value of solving social problems.

When social workers are reflecting on the contingencies related to solving social problems, the ontological model of social problems is applied to social work itself. They ask how social work as an institutionalized practice can in itself contribute to reproduction of social problems. Social work is not outside but working *within* a society of conditions and constructions. In particular, power relations can be reproduced within social worker-client relations:

> This [reproduction of problems] has also to do with the system we have. I usually say that we get many well educated clients … They have learned to invent problems and have learned to comply and satisfy the

Maria Appel Nissen

Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

demands of the system … By creating such a relation, we produce clients. (social work manager, child welfare services [1])

In fact, we decide what is necessary. There is not that much user involvement. There is absolutely a lot of discipline and restraint … you can favorably compare it to discipline, expressing exactly what it is. This is not something they are asking for. (social work manager, child welfare services [1])

In continuation of this, some social workers are concerned with what they term as a problem of "overtreatment." Overtreatment refers to the risk of constructing social problems, which are not real, consequently constraining or stressing individuals disproportionately, and thus contributing to the reproduction of social problems. This process is related to social workers' aspirations for solving problems and "doing good":

By overtreatment, I mean, this is about having respect for the agenda of the families. We are not to intervene as soon as we see something that we think might be problematic. We must be capable of accepting what we perceive as minor violations. We must be able to embrace this … We are making small interventions; we are to disturb as little as possible. This is why we are working with the families only 9-5 because in the long run we want the families to learn how to take care of themselves. But, this requires you have confidence in them. (social worker, child welfare services [1])

On the other hand, there is a risk of neglecting certain objective conditions and problems, failing to

act, and thus contributing to the reproduction of social problems. A social worker gives an example of this:

But, isn't it strange. On the one hand, we experience really heavy consequences of hash abuse. On the other hand, when this problem is addressed in the media, it is as if it is less problematic than drinking. It says in the newspaper today, that a lot of people say that children's use of hash is OK. *We have never suffered from smoking hash*, they said. But, here we are, dealing with the heavy, heavy consequences of hash abuse. (social worker, child welfare services [1])

Those reflections of social workers indicate the problem of knowing how reality really "is" when subjective experiences, objective conditions, and social constructions are all at play.

Even though the social workers do not have an explicit solution to this epistemological problem, they seem to draw on a particular form of knowledge that contributes to a constant reflection on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist aspects of social problems. This form of knowledge is expressed when social workers talk about the importance of "life experience," "a sense of how social life can be 'outside' your own sphere," a "sense of and an association with social problems," and the ability to "sit with and communicate with various people." A social worker reflects on this:

I dare to say that social workers must actually have a lot of knowledge. One thing is that we are more and more turned into specialists. Another thing is the importance of the approach you have to people.

It means something really, really special, when we are talking to a mother who is psychologically troubled. And it means something in terms of how we meet her and talk to her. Besides knowledge about people, we must have a sense of empathy, and we must be engaged. (social work manager, child welfare services [2])

Through meeting people, social workers get a sense of reality valuable in terms of constraining disproportionality. The mainspring of this sense is the experience of being together with, communicating with, and developing an emotional sensitivity towards the troubles and worries in people's lives. A social work manager explicitly takes a phenomenological approach when reflecting on the forms of knowledge promoted by the government:

Well, we want to do a good work, but we don't want to do it on the basis of the isomorphism, which they [the government] represent. We want to do a good work in a space, which allows us to be human and professional, and where there is a space for a phenomenological understanding of a family situation. (social work manager, child welfare services [3])

This "phenomenological space," which is attentive to *understanding* the immediate life world of people, might be what makes the combination of different approaches to social problems possible.

Reflections on Ontological and Epistemological Models

The exploration of social workers' perceptions of social problems indicates how social workers adopt

a sociological sense that is constituted by both an ontological model of social problems, as well as by epistemological reflections on the uncertainty of understanding and explaining concrete instances of social problems adequately from any point of view. In other words, in the sociological sense of social problems, in social work both ontological and epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist aspects of social problems are possible. While it might be an exaggeration to claim that social workers transcend dichotomies related to objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism, it remains that practical action calls for a multidimensional understanding and explanation of social reality. In practice, a preference for one single position is not the case. Instead, *different ontological and epistemological approaches to social problems are in use for the purpose of understanding and explaining social problems*. In this way, the perceptions of social problems in social work challenge scholarly approaches to social problems. What makes this possible?

Social workers express knowledge in a pragmatic, informal, and concrete way. Understandings and explanations of social problems are furthermore substantiated in *the actual experiences of how people's problems, worries, and suffering are related to changing societal conditions, constructions, and forces*. It is as if the practical capability to integrate subjectivism, objectivism, and social constructionism is based on a *sociological imagination*. Social workers seem to:

[k]now that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues—and in terms of the problems of his-

Maria Appel Nissen

Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

tory making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles—and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (Mills 1959:226)

On another level, this is possible through the imaginative capacity to make changes in perspective:

[f]or that [sociological] imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two. Back of this use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being. That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part, contemporary man's self-conscious view on himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed

realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. (Mills 1959:7)

As Mills argued, the ability to make changes in perspective is not only related to the observation of social phenomena in an ontological sense but also to an epistemological reflection. The individual observer must be able to place himself in a position of being *outside*, but must also recognize how he is situated *within* a social reality. This epistemological aspect of sociological imagination seems to be present in social workers' reflections on the uncertainty and the contingencies related to solving social problems.

A Final Remark: Re-Imagining Social Constructionism?

The promise of this article was to illustrate how explorations of social workers' perceptions of social problems can be a valuable source for addressing and reflecting on social constructionism. It was assumed that by studying social workers' perceptions of social problems we as social constructionists can learn something. Recent critiques of social constructionism question whether social constructionist analysis can actually be sensitive to the reality of social problems. This critique revitalizes scholarly controversies between objectivist, subjectivist, and social constructionist approaches. This article has explored the possibilities of learning something about this intricate relation between objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism by studying social workers' perceptions of social problems.

Through the exploration of social workers' perceptions of social problems—*the sociological sense of*

social problems in social work—it became possible to identify three different forms of knowledge of social problems: 1) an *ontological model* of social problems referring to both *subjectivist, objectivist, and social constructionist* assumptions, including 2) a model of *how social problems are reproduced*, and finally 3) *an epistemological reflection on the uncertainty of understanding and explaining social problems adequately*. As such, a major point of the article is that social workers' perception of social problems renders possible both ontological assumptions, as well as epistemological reflections on the objective, subjective, and social constructionist dimensions of social problems. This sociological sense of social problems is embedded in a practical approach to social problems reflecting the challenges of solving social problems. A major source for this approach is not only formal knowledge but also the social worker's life experience, practical engagement, empathy, and sensitivity towards social problems—in particular as they appear in the lives and troubles of individuals.

What might we as social constructionists learn from social workers' perceptions of social problems? We might learn that in society, and in particular where social problems are expected to be handled, people have a less dogmatic approach to social problems. Among social workers, dichotomies related to objectivism, subjectivism, and social constructionism are not prevalent. Rather, social workers seem to combine various ontological and epistemological reflections in a model of how social problems emerge, how they might be reproduced, and how solving social problems is a challenging task. In Mills's words, they practice a form of sociological imagination based on an ability to make changes in perspective.

As social constructionists, we might ask ourselves whether we are capable of making changes in perspective for the purpose of developing social constructionism: Can we enhance the scope and potentials of social constructionist analysis by being sensitive to other perspectives emphasizing the subjective and objective dimensions of social problems? I believe this would require a re-imagination of social constructionism as a reflexive approach. A way of approaching this re-imagination could be by cultivating studies of how various social actors working with social problems perceive and thus construct social problems based on their practical experiences. Without taking individual actor's perceptions for granted, we could use their constructions for reflection. *Are our theories and conceptualizations of social problems adequate when it comes to reflect on the complexity of social problems and how they are solved?*

Some might ask why social constructionist should be burdened with this reflection. Do we need to re-imagine social constructionism? Nothing is necessary, but we might learn something new about social constructionism's relation to society. For example, we might ask whether is it possible for social constructionists to hold a position of being outside while *at the same time* recognizing how we are a part of and can learn something from everyday experiences in society. I think this is possible if the pragmatic and less formal perceptions of social problems are used as a source for reflection. Perhaps this will move social constructionism into uncharted waters. However, the gain might be that we find ways of constructing new approaches to the social constructionist study of social problems.

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Social Workers and the Sociological Sense of Social Problems: Balancing Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Social Construction

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