Power Relations in Social Work

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Singapore

Power Relations in Social Work

- **The meeting between service users and social workers/authorities**
- **Service user experiences**
- **Service user participation in social work**

- **How these processes are influenced by – often invisible – power relations**

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Power Relations in Social Work

It is surprising how comparable service user experiences and meetings between social workers and service users are around the world

- although coming from regions with big differences in social policy, culture and administration of social work

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Power Relations in Social Work

From Patients, Clients, Customers, Consumers to Service Users, Experts by Experience, Persons and Citizens

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Power Relations in Social Work

Has the switch in terminology changed the position at all?

Will new labels, the talk about partnership and co-creation risk to cover up the power exercised by social workers and experienced by service users?

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Power Relations in Social Work

The power that might be even more important to analyze and discuss than finding new words and labels

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Power issues within social work

Power relations between social workers and service users

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A power that might hinder the ideals of partnership and the 'new' service user position/labels to be established

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In this understanding public support and collaboration between social workers and service users are not only problem-solving-processes. They are also central in increasing or reducing participation

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The way social workers act in the collaboration with service users is – and will be looked upon as – a signal to participation or nonparticipation, to partnership or non-partnership, to co-creation or one-way-creation

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Research have questioned both the success of respectful collaboration between service users and social workers and the involvement of service users

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Findings show that:

- **Service users don´t experience the relationship as respectful and confidential**

- **Service user feel dependent of the system – and its understanding of social work and issues in their life**

- **The relationship and collaboration can be used to adjust service users to the system**

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Service users want social workers to build up a relationship to them

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Engagement

- Time to talk to and to focus on the specific service user
- Listening actively

Human decency

- Professional and informal talk
- Using experience from own life
- Acting funny, angry and happy

Sincerity

- Making clear what the agency expects
- Informing about the content of actions
- Showing your own position

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They want to be respected and involved in the whole process of presenting, discussing, deciding, acting and evaluating their needs and problems

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- **Using service users as experts in their own life**
- **Making plans and goals together**
- **Offering right of access to case-records**
- **Sending summaries/minutes and written down decisions to the service user**

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It is within the relationship between social workers and service users the foundation of a partnership and co-creation processes seems to be established

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- **Social work models should be based on civil and human rights**
- **Support not care**
- **Recognition of different perspectives**
- **Balanced positions**
- **Possibilities to express their views**
- **Collective actions**
- **Relations based on respect**
- **Access to independent information**
- **Retaining of as much control as possible**

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Powerful actions were also taking place at 'good' meetings where social workers used their knowledge of communication and ethics and meetings where principles of participation were used

Power seem to hide itself even better when meetings are defined as positive by both parts

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The bureaucratic model machine

Social workers will be socialized to focus on logic, routines, methods, rules, instructions and rationality

The organizational frame seems to de-code tools and methods learned at bachelor and master programmes

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Participation and co-creation involves discussions with and decisions from the management

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The characteristic of this distinct power is that it in principal rule is not regarded as power by people involved

Järvinen & Mortensen

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A "universe of support"

- *Where service users are supported out of the very best intentions*

Donzelot

Where power is regarded as positive

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The positive "power" doesn´t look upon itself as power, but as an expression of "the best intentions" to help and support clients in their own development or an expression of the best knowledge and practice in social work
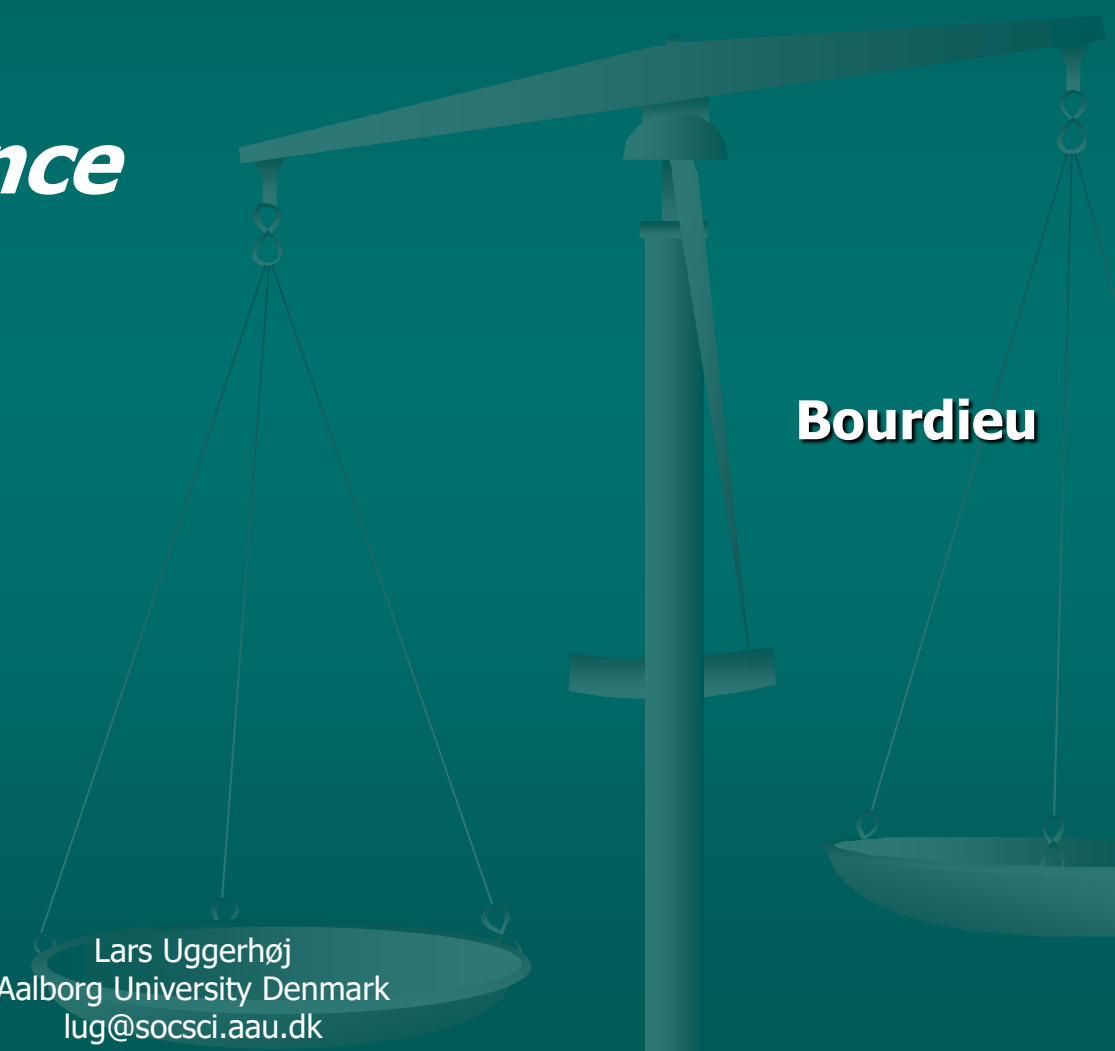
Larsen, Mortensen & Thomsen

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Symbolic violence

Bourdieu

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Social workers deliberately or unconsciously try to cover up the power and the power-relations

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Service users become 'willing agents' putting on submissive roles and positions

Järvinen and Mortensen

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Pseudo-acceptance
- the service user tries to obtain the best possible help from authorities by pretending to accept the institutional interpretation of his or her actions, but in reality sticks to their own different goals

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An invisible socialization of service users

Alcabas & Jones

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- ***The Applicant phase***

- ***The Novitiate Phase***

- ***The client phase***

Alcabas & Jones

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The problem is when dependence turns into discipline

When discipline becomes a part of a relationship between a powerful social worker and a dependent service user

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Social workers prefer service users that

- **Act most submissive**
- **Are demanding the talents of a helper**
- **Are grateful to the social worker**
- **Are accepting the framework and the rules of social work within agencies**

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Cultures and traditions within the collaboration are so strong that they both support the "not-wanted" roles and positions

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Public service providers try to convince the service user of the systems understanding of the social problem and how to solve it – through the established relationship between them

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The focus will be to make service users follow what is understood as the best understanding of the problem, the best solution and the best treatment within the system

To make the service user *suggest and express* what is understood as the best understanding, the best solution and the best treatment within the system

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Service user's suggestions could disturb the sensible rational within the organization

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Institutionalized social work practice can only survive in the long term, if there are clients who are prepared to or can be convinced to define their individual 'life project' in agreement with the professional understanding within the system

Järvinen & Mik-Meyer

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Involvement of clients is just a more hidden way of creating a willingly and compliant service user

Järvinen and Mik-Meyer

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The public service organizations need agents with a close relationship to the service user

The best agent is the social worker

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The serious issues concerning power and collaboration between social workers and service users makes it difficult for social workers to see, analyze and respond to service user perspectives and are in risk of opposing involvement, partnership and co-creation processes

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Power Relations in Social Work

There is no other way that analyzing social work and the relationship between social workers and service users

The presented research forms a basis for more local analysis, discussions and reflections

Power is a part of social work and it will never disappear

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Instead of hiding power social workers must face it

If social workers do not accept their own power they will not be able to share it

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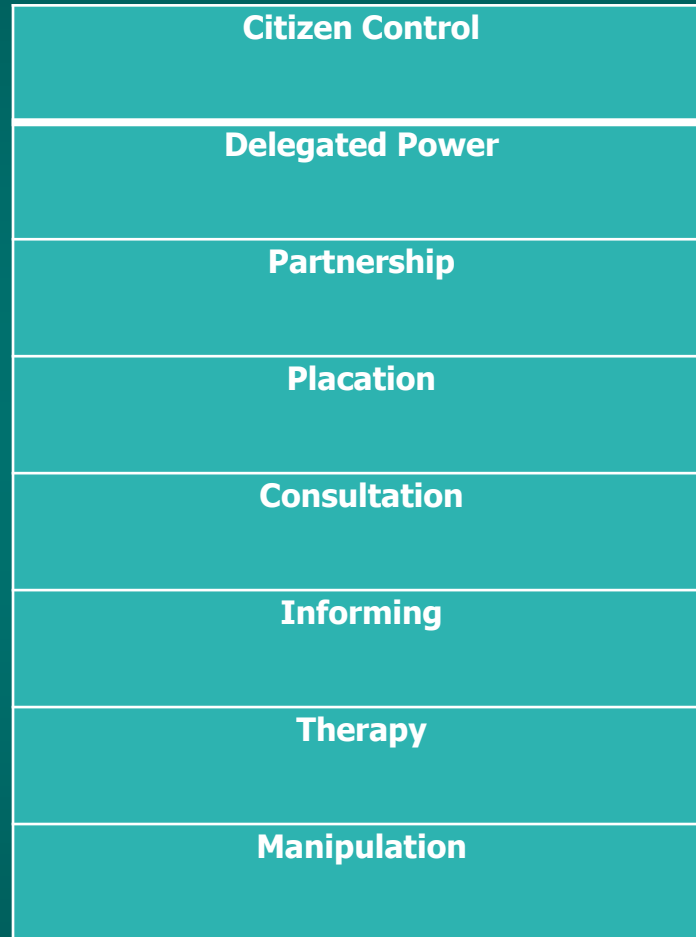Aalborg University Denmark
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Joint and professionalized meetings must be part of the daily work and is where the more general analysis can be connected to the local context

What does our power look like? Where is power hiding in our work – in critical situations? At nice meetings and collaborations?

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Citizen Control
Delegated Power
Partnership
Placation
Consultation
Informing
Therapy
Manipulation

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Power Relations in Social Work

- **Which rung the performed social work is at**

- **If the department want's to step up or down the ladder**

- **What kind of changes are needed to make a step**

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It gives a frame for analyzing participation and involvement and it shows that there are graduations

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Is it possible to want service users to step up the ladder if they are still meeting the same kind of power?

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Interactional model

Based on a collaboration agreement between the participants involved

The agenda and the definition of problems are made in collaboration

Crucial how the social worker communicates and whether he/she has the ability to establish a space for involvement

Shulman

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Power Relations in Social Work

Lawrence Shulman:

- **The preliminary phase**

- **The beginning phase**

- **The working phase**

- **The ending phase**

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TO VERILY BE ABLE TO HELP SOMONE

To verily succeed in leading a man to a certain place, one shall first and foremost be careful to find him where he is and begins. This is the secret behind all art of helping. Anyone who is unable to do so deludes himself by thinking that he can help someone.

To verily be able to help someone, I must understand more than he does - but first and foremost, must I understand what he understands. If I do not, my knowing more" will not help him at all. If I, nevertheless, should maintain my "knowing more", I do it out of pride and, properly speaking, want to be admired by him rather than helping him.

But all real help begins with humiliation: the helper must first humble himself under him whom he wants to help and, hereby, understand that helping means not to dominate but to be most patient, that helping implies willingness to submit, for the moment, to being wrong, and willingness to understand what the other does not understand

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Søren Kierkegaard

Danish philosopher, 1849