

Metaphors of change

Descriptions of changes within the practice of social work for socially marginalized people

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how a study of a practice can lay the foundation to describe this very practice whilst transformations of it were taken place. Descriptions of changes to the practice of social work which was observed empirically serve as a starting point for experimenting with how social scientists, though often exploring transformative study objects, can remain focused on describing the object, under study.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was done through circa one year of fieldwork conducted with participant observation in two Danish municipal units offering services to socially marginalized people and interviews with social workers and employees in drug/alcohol treatment and psychiatric units.

Findings – The object of study within social sciences, though changing, is able to be described. Through the theories of “Social Navigation” (Vigh) and “Strategy and Tactics” (de Certeau), the practice of social work can be described as one concrete bounded practice but one which is performed within a transformative/changeable environment that are capable of influencing it. In this case, the experience of a changeable seascape might serve as a metaphor for how study objects change within an environment of change; how they can be viewed as “motion within motion” (Vigh).

Originality/value – Even though fields such as anthropology and organizational studies seem to rid themselves from their objects of study (culture and organization, respectively) and dissociate themselves from descriptions thereof these objects might still be of value to us. Even though the objects of study in postmodern anthropology and organizational studies are defined as unbounded, anti-essential, ephemeral, ever-changing non-objects, this might not be the entire picture. Despite their ever-changing shape, we might still be able to study and describe them if we take their changeable form and environment into account.

Keywords Change, Social work, Anthropology, Organizational studies, Social marginalization, Welfare state

Paper type Research paper

1. Continuous change

I set out to explore the practice of care or help for socially marginalized citizens[1] in the Danish welfare state at the start of this twenty-first century. The original aim was to better understand the actual practice of social work[2]; that is, how it was provided, what it was that was actually provided and, if possible, how this was received. As the empirical fieldwork unfolded, however, new demands, values and ideas for the work were put forth. The care and help provided and the terms on which it was provided seemed to be changing. In the short span of approximately one year of fieldwork, several changes to the practice of social care were introduced. As I was trying to grasp how to understand and describe the social work practice, it seemed to be changing in front of me. In this paper, I wish to explore these changes, how we can understand change and changeable study objects, and how, or if, we, despite this changeable object, can seek to describe social work for socially marginalized people. In this sense, I wish to experiment with how changes can be incorporated in the analysis of the practice of social work instead of either picking a stable/frozen situation of it and describing it



solidly from there or presenting it as an ever-changing elusive practice so changeable that it cannot be described. To escape the idea that a practice which seems so changeable cannot be described successfully or becomes described so fluidly that we are left more in the dark about the study object (here the practice), than before we engaged with it. In short, to not risk denying a practice as a practice because it is experienced as changeable and therefore hard to describe. It seems that studies that have the goal of mere description have gone out of fashion in the social sciences in the past half-century (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017). The postmodern critique and following decline of studies that engage with mere descriptions, such as descriptions of a culture (within anthropology) (Olwig, 1994) and descriptions of an organization (within organizational studies) (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017) serve as examples of this. By discussing this decline and critique, I want to explore how we can insist on analyses that try to illuminate the object of study even though it is changeable.

In this paper, I therefore wish to: first, describe four types of changes, or demands for change, to the social work practice experienced during fieldwork in two Danish municipalities; and second, discuss how the social work practice, though changing, can still be described. By exploring the postmodern critique and following decline of studies that have the goal of mere descriptions in the social sciences (such as describing a culture in anthropology or an organization in organizational studies), I wish to argue how mere descriptions might still serve as a way to illuminate the object under study. Third, by applying the theories of “strategy and tactics” by phenomenologist Michel de Certeau and “social navigation” by anthropologist Henrik Vigh, I will make a preliminary attempt at analyzing how we can keep describing (an aspect of) the social work practice in the Danish welfare state even though it seemed to be changing during fieldwork.

2. Changes in public administration offices

Studies of reforms and changes in the public sector are numerous and varied highlighting different aspects of the sector and different types of reforms and changes (for instance, Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Bjerger, 2009; Lane, 1997; Vohnsen, 2011). During my fieldwork in two Danish municipalities between December 2015 and fall/winter of 2016, several changes in the public services for socially marginalized people were initiated or were already taking place. Changes ranged from smaller local changes in one municipal office, through larger reforms affecting several municipal departments, to implementation of national legal reforms affecting all Danish municipalities. These changes, to a lesser or greater extent, were aimed at affecting socially marginalized people's behavior and attitudes, at changing the kinds of services delivered to socially marginalized people or at the service delivery praxis itself.

I observed these changes while conducting fieldwork in two public services that provided help in accordance with the laws of social and employment affairs in Denmark. I conducted fieldwork in these two services, choosing to follow: a social affairs department that tried to help socially marginalized people through a special employment program for users that accommodated their intoxication and abuse of drugs/alcohol, symptoms of mental illness, attendance difficulties, managing a workplace-setting with colleagues, etc.; and a municipal employment authority which provided help for socially marginalized youth to enter education or employment and, at the same time, handling other social problems such as homelessness, mental illness, drug/alcohol abuse, etc. which was perceived as standing in the way of this. I experienced these efforts by participating during normal working hours (most often circa 08:00-16:00) and by interviewing the employees, a few of the users and other actors that provided help for this group of people (for instance, employees in municipal drug rehabilitation centers, psychiatric outreach care units, etc.). Some of the changes I came to experience, or heard talk about, concerned a new law, a new municipal strategy, a new organizational structure and what appeared to be the dismissal of a certain

value or goal for the practice of social work. Some changes were already in the making and some were communicated as in the making. In this case, the different types of change included: organizational changes; legal changes; changes due to new municipal strategies; and changes in popular public sentiments and resentments. Below, I wish to elucidate the four types of changes and to use them as a starting point to experiment with ways of understanding change and how to describe “study objects” that change.

2.1 New organizational layout

On the notice board next to the desk of the social worker sits a quote, wrongly ascribed to Gaius Petronius, a public servant of the Roman Emperor Nero, which goes something along these lines: “We worked hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to succeed, plans for reorganization were initiated. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralization.” I have seen this quote in different forms in several public administration offices, both municipal and national. Even though this quote cannot be attributed to this public servant of the Roman Emperor, the statement seems to tell a common story of change in public administration.

Some of the more experienced public administrators would sometimes reflect on these changes aloud to me. In an after work talk one day, for instance, the deputy head of a municipal department, supplying social services for socially marginalized people in one of Denmark’s most populous cities, thought aloud along these lines:

It seems that we reorganize every three to four years. Each time, we call the changes something new but, in reality, they are not as new as they sound. We reorganize, but then change it back some years later. I have come to recognize these changes now, even though they are called by a different name, because I have worked here so long. It seems they want to reorganize themselves out of certain problems, but every reorganization creates other challenges and, after a while, you come to recognize the kind of problems that come with each reorganisation and you think to yourself, but we have already tried this way of organizing our work.

She described how the organization kept demanding new organizational layouts and how, in the end, she came to recognize these changes, despite the different names they were given, as something they had already tried, more or less. These changes would cause new departments to be formed, for instance, and new working procedures, in the sense of where a service user might be referred to and which department would be responsible for what. The social work itself might, in this case, not be affected, but the framing of the work and who had an influence on it (that is to say, who set out the priorities for the work) could change. This type of change was often proposed from within local units themselves, or from a higher level within the municipality. The social workers, who provided the actual social care and assistance, appeared not to be involved in developing these change proposals. Instead, they heard about it after the new organizational layout was in the making. Much as we heard in the account of the deputy head, they appeared to be changes that shaped the layout of their work practice but not something they actively called for themselves. In this way, the changes were local but often formulated on a different level than that of the front line staff.

A second change, I experienced was at a national level and was driven by legal changes. It demanded action, within a specified timeframe, from the front line social work staff since all socially marginalized citizens were affected by it.

2.2 New bill

In April 2016, a new bill was scheduled for its final reading in the Danish Parliament. The bill was intended to motivate recipients of social security to get a job or to “get closer to

the 'Danish labor market' by requiring that they work 225 hours a year in order to keep their current social security allowances or face receiving a reduced level. The monthly allowance, it was estimated, would be reduced by about one-fifth or one-sixth of their current social security, depending on the recipient's civil status, the number of children, etc. The two largest Danish municipalities, where I conducted my fieldwork, were already aware of the law and its possible consequences for their citizens on benefit before its passing in Parliament or that is, front line staff became aware of the consequences of the bill before it was passed.

On my introductory day in the laundry workshop of a social employment center for socially marginalized people, situated in a compound of homeless shelters and a drop-in center, a social worker was providing help for a group of service users. I was introduced to the daily work and the social employment center in general. The social worker in charge of the workshop was helping a group of three to eight people with their day-to-day problems, trying to motivate them to turn up at the social employment, setting goals such as having some meaningful hours of occupation and perhaps reducing drug and/or alcohol abuse, symptoms of mental illness, etc. The social worker seemed to use their own motivation to show up and, from there, gain influence to help them with their problems.

A few days after my initial meeting in the laundry workshop, the social worker approached the manager of the social employment center. A man who worked in the workshop had received news of this new bill, which might affect his monthly disposable income. He had received advice from his local employment office to try and obtain a job as quickly as possible because this bill, if passed, might reduce his monthly pay if he did not work 225 hours a year. He had retold the story to the social worker in the laundry workshop where he worked and asked her for help. She did not know of this law, had never heard of it and did not know what to do. The deputy manager had received news of the bill, but did not know the effect of it yet or how to interpret it. The same afternoon, however, two staff members from the local municipal employment authority were scheduled to attend a meeting concerning some other issues and the manager promised to check up on the law and its consequences for the users of the workshops. I was able to gain access to the meeting and there followed a longer discussion of the bill and its possible consequences for the recipients of social security in the social employment service, and the social workers in the municipality in general. It turned out that the law would, in all probability, be passed in April, come into effect in July, but might have a retrospective effect, since the 225 hours might be counted from October last year. Citizens with social problems, such as severe drug/alcohol addiction and/or severe mental problems, might be excluded from the provisions of the law, however. They might, therefore, be unaffected by it all. But on this day, February 24, 2016, no one knew which criteria would be used for exemption from the law and no one was able to know the law for certain, because it had not been passed.

The manager and deputy manager debated how to handle this new situation for the citizens attending the social employment program. They knew they were very concerned about their economic situation and many were in a vulnerable position, some having debts, problems with drug/alcohol abuse and of keeping abstinences at bay, difficulties paying their rent or having problems accessing the housing market because of their already low monthly allowance. Many were very stressed about their economic situation and the manager was under the impression that a lowering would most probably only aggravate their level of stress in their everyday life. The manager and deputy manager debated whether they were to advise all workshop managers to work as hard as possible to push their users into part-time jobs or trainee positions to gain the 225 hours a year in order to keep their current social security level, or just keep on providing social support as usual by working with the individuals' own motivation and daily problems, hoping that the users would be exempted from the law because of their social situation.

The manager of the social employment center asked the deputy manager of the employment center how best to advise his social workers and users in the workshops. Should they put more pressure on the users to get a job, even though this was against their normal method of trying to work with the users' own motivation to better their situation? However, the deputy manager of the employment service did not know how to guide the manager. They had no knowledge of what the law might entail, or even whether the law would actually come into effect[3]. They ran the risk of the users being categorized as too well if they got a job or trainee position. As a result, they might not be exempted from the law because of their defined social problems and would instead be required to continue working for the 225 hours each year, which they might not be able to fulfill in the long run[4].

The vice manager had to report back to the social workers in the workshops that it was not possible for them to know the effects of the law and that they did not know if the users of the workshops might be exempt from it. He decided to wait for the passing of the law and not to change their social work praxis, hoping no users would be negatively affected by its inception.

In this case, the practice of social work was not altered, but the presence of the bill called for a re-evaluation of the practices, in some way or another, to avoid what was perceived as possible damaging reductions of the users' social security allowances. As a consequence, the social workers had to re-evaluate their current practice that is of supporting users in line with their own wishes and their conditions and instead try to encourage, pressurize or force the individual users into work.

These changes, arising from changes to national laws, were powerful ones that affected social workers in all municipalities across the nation at the same time. Other changes had a less strict timeframe and arose locally from new ideas, for instance, as to how to tackle unemployment through a new municipal employment strategy.

2.3 New municipal employment strategy

At a three day new-employee introduction program in the municipal employment authority I was attending, the head of the human resources department explained to the new employees that the department was working with a new paradigm which they had named "from caseworker to job consultant." He explained that, in future, employees in the municipality were to perceive their job more as consultants, who are coaching or guiding citizens toward employment or education, than as caseworkers, who simply "handle the citizens' cases." In the past, the priority for employees had been to understand the laws thoroughly, almost to the point of being able to recite them verbatim, and to have a profound knowledge of proper conduct in casework, due process, etc. This would now be regarded as less important than the employee's individual strategies and skills in helping citizens into employment or education as set out in the local authority's guidelines. He described a change where employees were rather to view themselves as consultants, guiding, coaching and empowering citizens. The future of helping unemployed people into work would, therefore, rest on individual coaching techniques. In this sense, he described how knowledge of the law, handling of cases in accordance with the rule of law, though still necessary, would be viewed as less important tools than personal skills in the actual practice of helping people into work itself. He mused aloud about how the development would probably result in an environment where formal professional or vocational skills and qualifications were less important than having personal drive and flair. By way of analogy, the past metaphor for the ideal worker who were so proficient in the law that she could be woken at 5 a.m. and recite the law and the amendments in Schutz (the IT system for handling new laws and adjudications) would no longer serve as example of the ideal caseworker.

This shift in paradigm and attitude toward casework was not only aimed at new employees but was also disseminated to experienced workers in the other offices of the

employment authority. The experienced workers told me that all employees had to attend a course aimed at changing their practices “from caseworker to job consultant.” At the small municipal unit in which I did my fieldwork, employees said the manager had asked for attendance charts from the course provider to make sure all employees had attended. One employee recounted how the manager had spoken with her because her name was not on the attendance list. Every employee had to fulfill the course and, in this way, know the new priorities (and titles) of their job.

By describing the field of social work differently, new visions concerning social work in the departments of the employment authority were formulated. These were communicated and tried implemented through mandatory courses and new introduction programs for the employees. In effect, new priorities were set for interactions between social workers and citizens. New municipal visions, about how best to help citizens into employment, demanded a different take on how to perform the casework practice itself. In this sense, this type of change was instrumental more than organizational and were aimed at interfering with the services provided by front line staff directly.

Another form of change, which I experienced during fieldwork, also ended up addressing the front line work directly but stemmed from a different sphere entirely in that it seemed to be brought on by external factors, that is from actors beyond the municipality or the state. This type of change seemed to originate from research and from popular sentiments, or rather resentments, about focusing exclusively on the individual human capacity to solve problems in life and demanding the individual handle them on his own. This change seemed to be influenced by the changes in public popular debate concerning this individual focused idea, which formerly seemed to have shaped the visions of the social work prominent within one small employment authority unit I studied.

2.4 New methodological approaches

At the introductory meeting to gain access to do fieldwork in a municipal employment authority unit, the manager of the unit applied the concept and theory of “resilience,” or “sturdiness,”[5] as a way to explain how he and his employees tried to help socially marginalized people fare better in their life and to handle and live with their individual social problems. In an interview with an employee of the unit, this concept was also referred to. She recounted how the employees had attended a course provided by a not-for-profit association in order to understand the concept and apply it to their work with socially marginalized people. The goal was to “boost the users resilience,” giving them ways to cope with their individual problems and life situation. The concept of “resilience” seemed to have been a core concept guiding some of their work.

By the time I started fieldwork in this office, public debate and criticism of the concept had gained ground in the national media (Holmgren, 2014; Grumsen, 2016a; Mikkelsen, 2016b; Abrahamson, 2014). The critique that originally had emerged a couple of years prior to my fieldwork started as a general popular resentment of “the culture of self-development,” which was seen as promoting the aim of optimizing individual performance and the individual’s life situation through “coaching and self-development techniques” (Brinkmann, 2014). This popular resentment promoted the avoidance of a culture of self-development and a critical attitude toward the idea of the individual as solely responsible for handling stressful and difficult life situations on their own (Grumsen, 2016a; Mikkelsen, 2016b; Willig, 2016). The critique came to encompass the idea of enforcing individual sturdiness as well and came to highlight skepticism toward the concept of “sturdiness” literally (Mikkelsen, 2016b; Willig, 2016). Even though this popular resentment was intended as a general critique of a culture of development originally (Brinkmann, 2014), and later a critique of work-environments that demanded sturdiness from employees in general (Willig, 2016), the vision of sturdiness as an aim in social work practice seemed to be affected by it as well.

The concept seemed less used than at the introductory meeting, and was criticized by the daily manager of the municipal unit. Employees, who at first told me they had spent time understanding and adapting to the theories of sturdiness, did not refer much to the concept in their daily work, though sometimes referring to some of the elements of the theory. In this way, the visions for the social work practice still contained residues of the theory, but this was downplayed, it seemed, by the time I got there. Social work practices, as I had wanted to describe them, seemed to a lesser extent than at the introductory meeting, to contain ideas of resilience. Instead, the ideas seemed to have given way to other visions, methodologies, approaches and concepts also used in the field.

In this sense, the public and popular debate criticizing the use of the term “resilience” and the idea of boosting the citizen’s resilience seemed to interfere with the social workers’ motivation to use the term. Despite initial references to the term, it almost died out entirely only a few months after it was enthusiastically applied by the manager of the department as a specific goal for their work and a positive method to be employed in work with users.

3. Adaptation or adoption of change

As seen in these four descriptions, the practice of social work met many and varied changes, prompted by a range of factors, both internal and external to the municipalities, which often seemed to originate externally from the front line staff. That is, the new practices sprang from ideas originating from other sources than the front line staff. Social workers were practicing in an environment of many changes, which to a greater or lesser extent spilled into the social work practice itself.

The question of whether the practice was changed or not, that is whether the social workers adapted the changes so they fitted with their existing practices, or adopted the changes as directly as possible by discarding old practices, varied from case to case and from caseworker to caseworker. It also varied in connection to which type of change the individual met. When reacting to the new bill, in the example I gave from one municipality, the social worker was very concerned with how to organize her practice so as to help her citizens gain the best footing when faced with this law, but the group of experienced caseworkers I was with in the other municipality did not show much use of energy on this change. Though discussing it and having a meeting about it they were not talking very worriedly of the consequences for their practice because of the new bill and seemed rather unimpressed with it being put through. One of them went to an introductory meeting about the law held by one of the municipal jurists, on what it entailed and the consequences of the law. They knew something was coming up and knew they had to engage with it in some way. But she left before the end of the meeting because she had other more pressing business and told her co-workers that they would just have to wait and see what the changes entailed. This group of, mostly experienced, social workers seemed less concerned by this new change and less put out of their daily routine by it. But then again, when negative public sentiments concerning the concept of “resilience” was gaining ground, not many of them used this concept, even though some had received training in it.

In this way, it is not possible to understand change as a constant causal factor, which results in the exact same outcome in every municipality or in every social worker. Changes occur but they cannot be understood as direct linear causations. The changes can so to speak not be seen as in a sort of architectural 1:1 model where one change can be seen causing the same practice in exactly the same way by every social worker in every municipality. Furthermore, the changes to the social work practitioners’ practice cannot be viewed as a result of social workers either adopting or adapting to the changes in a linear practice of either resistance or compliance. Instead we can describe the social work practice as a practice that seem to be somewhat influenced or affected by all kinds of factors in an environment of change which the workers have to deal with in their work and which they do so in many different ways. The problem then poses itself: can we perceive of a social work

practice if changes are so heavily induced on it and if the individual social worker reacts in such varied ways to these changes? And how do you describe something, which is already in the process of changing while you are looking at it?

4. Studying objects that change

The fact that the practice of social work seems to be susceptible to forces such as a new bill, new organizational patterns, new methodological approaches, etc. might suggest that social work is not a stable practice and perhaps, therefore, that it is not possible to define and describe this practice in itself. The logical argument might be that the fact that the empirical object (the practice in this case) under study seemed to be so heavily influenced by different factors which cause it to change, that the practice itself is non-definable or even that it cannot be seen to exist as a practice on its own. In which case, we might as well give up on describing the practice as a specific practice in itself because what is the point of describing something if it changes the next second? How misleading would it be to describe something uniformly or as a stable entity or essence (a stable concrete practice) when it keeps transforming.

This problem somewhat resembles the problem of understanding and describing culture(s) and the development of the ways anthropologists came to understand cultural changes within the practice of postmodern anthropology (Olwig, 1994; Turner, 1993; Hastrup and Ramløv, 1998). The postmodern argument seems to have relied heavily on the idea that because the object (culture) are capable of change, and might do so even while we perceive it, descriptions of a culture must not produce a static and bounded picture of it but rather convey it as fluid, dynamic and in perpetual making (as changing)[6].

Anthropological understandings of culture, from the 1960's onwards, can be summarized as an idea of a bounded, communal and integrated whole which all members of society were socialized as carriers of (Olwig, 1994, p. 7). Culture was conveyed as a unity with clearly demarcated outlines or borders (Olwig, 1994, p. 7) and each culture made up its own universe of meaning, which separated it from other cultures that also had their own bounded unity and universes of meaning (Olwig, 1994). In postmodern anthropology this understanding deteriorates and an evolverment of dissolving the object starts:

The concept of culture has so far most often been used descriptively; both in daily speech and in science-language it has referred to a certain life pattern or a set of inherited habits and perceptions. In this way, culture has a fairly imprecise content, which generally, however, is characterized by being observable. In anthropology the concern is not about *seeing* culture because its most significant quality is *coherence* rather than actual content. That is why the concept of culture is used analytically as a designation for that pattern which connects the mixed experience-data[7] (Hastrup and Ramløv, 1998, p. 8).

This evolution transforms anthropology from a study of cultural diversity and culture as content to more elusive analyses of coherences. It shifts toward analyzing ever-smaller units within "cultures," subcultures or so-called identities, or to analyzing processes instead of units, for instance processes of building identity (e.g. nationalism, ethnic groups, etc.). In a critique of multicultural understandings of culture, anthropologist Terence Turner describes how cultures ought not to be understood, and also therefore prescribes a more appropriate way to understand culture, when he describes the dangers of multicultural practices:

It risks essentialising the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race; it risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing their boundedness and mutual distinctness; [...], and by treating cultures as badges of group identity (Turner, 1993, p. 412).

This classical understanding and descriptions of culture is posed as a problem because it has reified and essentialised something that should, rather, be seen as dynamic, fluid and unbounded. As anthropologist Karen Olwig (1994) states, the anthropological endeavor of describing culture(s) as bounded, clearly demarcated units becomes criticized, deconstructed

and even given up within the field of postmodern anthropology itself (p. 7). Culture, as a concept in anthropology that is able to describe an entity, seems to be largely dispensed with or to be treated with blatant skepticism.

In a similar vein, organizational studies seem to have undergone a similar development in the past half century, though the origin of that development might arise from a different background. Sociologist Paul du Gay and Social Psychologist Signe Vikkelsø describe a process where protagonists in organizational studies also become critical toward the object of study, or of having an object of study, actually. They analyze how “organizational studies became skeptical toward what used to be its key concept and object of study” (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017, p. 10) such that “organization studies today is increasingly devoid of ‘an object’, having spent much of the last half-century actively ‘disappearing’ it” (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017, p. 52).

Just as in the field of anthropology, organizational studies have lost touch with their core object of analysis or, rather, brought forward an idea of how we should go about (not) analyzing the object (in that it cannot be perceived as such), which leaves a space for studies that are rather trying to describe processes or actions:

The object of analysis is less the organization as a distinctive entity than ongoing, multifarious, and often ephemeral processes of “organizing”. Here, organizations are never fully established, but always in the process of “becoming” tasks are not given bundles of activity to be undertaken, but the occasional result of interpretative processes; and actors are not engaged in practical, recurrent work, but in making sense of, experimenting with, and enacting in an unstable environment (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017, p. 77).

In this way, organization studies seems to also let go of its object of study as a distinctive entity in preference for a more fluid, dynamic and elusive object (if object at all). Instead of setting out to explore and describe empirical representations of culture(s) or organization(s), the disciplines seem caught up with an elusive empirical object and theory building which du Gay and Vikkelsø muses on as a general fate in the human and social sciences:

Maybe this is a fate befalling not only organization studies, but other areas of human and social sciences too? Could it be that, in letting of the idea of themselves as “practical sciences” and embracing the “moment of theory”, these disciplines have come to dispense with the core objects that afford them their practical relevance? Maybe in pursuit of new theoretical horizons, much work in the human and social sciences has reached an impasse in which a certain isomorphism has begun to develop; where the points and recommendations sounds remarkably alike across fields? If this is the case, [...] the way forward may indeed be to revisit the core object of each discipline (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017, p. 149).

These developments within human and social sciences thus pose a risk to the act of describing the object under study, since we have dispersed with these objects (and concepts) by shrouding them in anti-essentialist form and, through this process, we lose an understanding of the empirical object. We risk analyzing ephemeral processes instead of what we set out for. Within anthropology the “disappearing” of description of cultures and in organization studies the “disappearing” of descriptions of organizations. The development of dismissing the analysis of a culture or an organization, and the denial of trying to grasp these as essential bounded units for analysis because we should rather perceive them as perpetually changing, unbounded, fluid and non-entities leaves us without a core object of study and the core concept. In this way, analyses that end out in descriptions of the core object are disregarded as some sort of archaic form of science. Following du Gay and Vikkelsø the solution is, however, not to dispense with the object but to return to the study and description of empirical realities and to using the concepts from, what they call, a “classical stance” once again. This, they argue, is a better way to contribute to knowledge of the object of study, instead of leaving it as

an ephemeral elusive object and theorizing about its ever-changing nature. Following this line of thought through in the field of social work, instead of declaring the practice of social work as an elusive, anti-essentialist and non-existent practice and, thereby, shrouding it in ever more mystery and risking denying the existence of the practice, the description of social work for socially marginalized people can be bounded in the empirical reality of the practice of social work, even though the object has an elusive and changeable character. Instead of refraining from creating descriptions and analyses of a certain practice because of its evolving nature, we must engage with its changeable character. But, then, how are we to understand and actually describe this changeable object?

4.1 *Metaphors of change*

One way to describe objects that change can perhaps be perceived through phenomenologist Michel de Certeau's (1988/1984) understanding, adapted from the military theoreticians von Bülow and von Clausewitz, of strategy and tactics and in anthropologist Henrik Vigh's (2009) work on social navigation. Inspired by de Certeau, human actions or practices can be guided or understood as a mix of strategies and tactics. In this way, the maneuvering of social workers, according to new laws passed in parliament, new organizational layout in the municipalities, new approaches spurred on by popular public sentiments or new municipal visions and strategies, can be seen as a tactical movement in the face of new strategies. Tactics are the maneuver of a body that "does not, [...] have the options of planning a general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a distinct, visible and objectifiable space" (de Certeau, 1988/1984, p. 37). de Certeau states how the tactics do have a sort of mobility, that is a means and power to move, but it is "a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any moment" (de Certeau, 1988/1984). Tactics are movements made because the power of another is imposed, because of strategies already put in place. "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (de Certeau, 1988/1984). The social workers can be seen as part of the system, the governmental and municipal system that make up the services to the socially marginalized people but, even so the passing of new laws in parliament, for instance, exemplifies a force that is foreign to the everyday workings of the social workers. As seen in the example from the workshop, their practice is shaped by an idea of how to help the citizens best in light of their situation, but the law poses a new idea of how to help citizens and enforces on them some deliberation and reorientation as to how to execute the work.

de Certeau's "military" concepts, however, leave an impression of the field of social work as clouded in power and power relations, but there were also changes which seemed to stem from or address changes in public popular sentiments, such as the concept and method of "resilience." Perhaps social work practice can better be understood from a general perspective of environments susceptible to change or as an environment in perpetual motion. Through the concept of social navigation, stemming from his fieldwork among youth in Guinea-Bissau, anthropologist Henrik Vigh gives us a way to understand the environment of human practices as in perpetual movement. Based on this work, Vigh states that: "All social environments are in perpetual motion" which:

[...] forces us to tune our social-scientific gaze to practice as motion within motion. Acknowledging that for our interlocutors the social environment is not stable or static but an unfolding process requires that we analyse practice in a manner that is sensitive to the fact that strategy, tactics and practice [...] are constructed and actualized in, and constantly attuned to, a shifting environment and its imagined configurations (Vigh, 2009, p. 431).

In this way, our lives are not just tactics played out to adhere to strategies of a higher power but lives lived in an ever-moving terrain or perhaps, rather, a seascape.

Vigh (2009) goes on to argue for an understanding of the social world as a metaphor from navigation rather than sedentary or terrestrial understandings, popular in the so-called “spatial turn”. Instead of making use of landscape metaphors, he calls for metaphors from a seascape when understanding social settings in which people navigate:

Invoking “navigation”, we thus tacitly acknowledge that the agent is positioned within a force field which moves him and influences his possibilities of movement and positions [...]. Where many social scientific illuminations of practice position people and their movement within relatively stable and solidified social settings, indicated in the words we use to describe the “ground” upon which we move – social structures, arenas, fields or landscapes – something interesting happens when invoking the concept of navigation: our analytical gaze moves toward the way people not just act in but interact with their social environment and adjust their lives to the constant influence (in potentia and presentia) of social forces and change (Vigh, 2009, p. 433).

The idea of motion within (or on) motion is not only relevant to areas of conflict or decline because:

[...] the concept of social navigation is not only restricted to West Africa or areas of political turmoil and volatility. As our social worlds are always in motion [...]. Even entities as structured as Western bureaucracies can be experienced as opaque, volatile and wavering, when seen from the perspective of the people in whom the impersonal order acts (Vigh, 2009, pp. 430-431).

And, if used in this empirical field, not only citizens but also the workers within bureaucracies can experience this motion in motion. The social workers were working under conditions of perpetual motion. They were practicing within motion. Moreover, Vigh's (2009) idea of motion within motion builds up a picture of the way social environments are in perpetual motion but also of the way the pace of that motion can vary (p. 430). In this way, social work practice can fluctuate between fast paced and slower motion. In the examples, the change concerning the new bill was perhaps the most rapid one, which came with a pressing demand for change and action for the front line staff even though work on a bill in national offices often take a long time.

5. Conclusion

By describing four different types of change to the social work practice, I have tried to illuminate how that practice is influenced by a variety of factors emerging in the wider environment it is performed. More generally, the descriptions of changes to the practices of social work might serve as a starting point for experimenting with how qualitative-oriented social scientists and ethnographers, though often exploring transformative study objects such as phenomena or practices, can remain focused on descriptions of the original object of study even though it seems changeable.

By understanding the social environment as in perpetual motion, which by default expects change, we need not give up on the objects of our analysis or our core concepts though they are changing in front of us. In the social work practices, influenced by diverse changes such as a new bill, a new municipal strategy, new public sentiments and new organizational layout in the municipalities, the changes indeed seemed to be quite heavily present in the field. But these changes need not cause us to characterize the practice itself as an ever fluid and changeable practice, but rather as a practice performed in an environment of motion, which might contain elements of some stability or endurance through time. As the concepts or analysis of culture and organization as bounded entities need not be discarded because of changeable traits or a changeable environment, so social work practice might still be described. In this way, the changeable traits need not promote a renouncement of the description of practice but as a description that is sensitive to a changeable practice in an environment of motion.

Even though fields such as anthropology and organizational studies seem to rid themselves of their objects of study (culture and organization, respectively) and

dissociate themselves from descriptions thereof, these objects, and their description, might still be of value to us. Even though the objects of study in postmodern anthropology and organizational studies are defined as unbounded, anti-essential, ephemeral and ever-changing non-objects, this might not be the entire picture. Through the theories of “Social Navigation” (Vigh, 2009) and “Strategy and Tactics” (de Certeau, 1988/1984), the practice of social work can be described as a specific actual bounded practice which, however, is performed within a transformative environment that is capable of influencing it. Despite its ever-changing shape, we might still be able to study and describe it if we take its changeable form and environment into account.

Notes

1. I use the term “socially marginalized citizens,” “users” and “socially marginalized people” to cover the citizens with complex social problems such as mixture of drug/alcohol abuse, mental illness and unemployment that receive social services from the municipality.
2. I use the term social care and social work intermittently as I perceive these two types of work as interchangeable or as minor differences in practice. However, the type of work will, in the Danish practice, often be of two different sorts; of first, an assessment of the social or unemployment problems and a determination of which services to provide (often described as casework), and second, in a social care practice that involves the execution of the actual services to the socially marginalized citizens (often described as social care). For the type of argument in this paper, it matters not where we place the analytical level of reflection and the two practices are used interchangeably.
3. At this point, the Danish umbrella organization of disabled groups was heavily criticizing the new law and several amendments had already been made. Furthermore, a scandal concerning an agricultural reform had resulted in a vote of no confidence to the minister of the environment, threatening the prime minister’s credibility and raising the prospect of an early election, thereby risks canceling of all new bills, including the law concerning the 225-hour rule.
4. Several social workers told me that based on their year-long experiences with the socially marginalized people they worked with indicated that only one to two persons out of a 100 was able to get an ordinary job. And that some of these only held it for a while and returned to the special social employment service again afterwards. Furthermore, their experience from the social employment service was that, on average, a normal full-time workload of an ordinary employee could be handled by circa ten people with social problems. That was the extent of their social problems in connection to their capability of handling an ordinary full-time workload.
5. In Danish: Robusthed.
6. An argument which seems rather strange since many classical works in anthropology mentions cultural developments or adaptations such as E.E. Evans-Pritchards (1940) descriptions of “The Nuer.”
7. Translated from Danish: “Kulturbegrebet har hidtil oftest været brugt deskriptivt; både i daglig tale og i videnskabssproget har det henvist til et bestemt livsmønster eller et sæt af nedarvede vaner og forestillinger. I den betydning har kultur et temmelig upræcist indhold, som dog generelt er karakteriseret ved at kunne iagttages. I antropologien drejer det sig ikke om at *se* kultur, fordi dens væsentligste kvalitet er *sammenhæng* snarere end konkret indhold. Derfor bruges kulturbegrebet analytisk som en betegnelse for det mønster, som forbinder de blandede erfaringsdata” (Hastrup and Ramløv, 1998, p. 8).

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