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The help system and its reflection theory: a sociological observation of social work

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The relation between sociology and social work is analysed in this article as a relation between observer and object of observation. As a theoretical framework, we use Luhmannian systems theory, according to which modern society is characterised by functional differentiation, that is a horizontal structure of function systems such as polity, economy, education, science, law, etc. Each of these fulfils a particular function for society. One such system is the help system, referring to social services and their practice. Its societal function is the management of inclusion/exclusion and social integration. Function systems contain what Luhmann calls ‘reflection theories’, which are associated with specific academic disciplines (such as the political system/political theory/political science or the education system/pedagogical theory/educational science). Although their basic operations are linked to science (research, theories and methods, publications), reflection theories are part of their system; their function is to reflect on the unity and meaning of the function system. This article argues that the discipline of social work serves as the reflection theory for the help system. A solid reflection theory in the help system is important in order to define guiding criteria for professional ethics to be used in social services. The lack of an adequate reflection theory can lead to the intrusion of ideologies that are inappropriate to the logic of the help system, such as New Public Management or administrative technocracy, which might threaten the integrity of the help system.

Keywords: help system; Luhmann; reflection theory; social work; social work science

Introduction

In this article, we discuss the relation between sociology and social work as a relation of subject and object, or observer and observed. In particular, we make use of Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems (Luhmann 2012, 2013) as a framework to observe the discipline of social work. From this perspective, we present a description of social work which may seem unfamiliar and will most likely differ from typical state-of-the-art descriptions provided by the discipline itself. Having said that, we claim that it offers insights that are nevertheless highly relevant to social work.

According to Luhmann’s theory, the primary structure of modern society is *functional differentiation*, that is a horizontal differentiation form of function systems such as the polity, economy, religion, science, etc. each fulfilling a particular function for society. Another such system is the *help system*. This system refers to social work practice and largely coincides with the social services. Its societal function is the management of inclusion/exclusion.

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Function systems contain what Luhmann calls ‘reflection theories’, which are associated with specific academic disciplines (such as the political system/political theory/political science or the education system/pedagogical theory/educational science). This article argues that the discipline of social work serves as the *reflection theory for the help system*. Although their basic operations are linked to science (research, theories and methods, publications), reflection theories are part of their system; their function is to reflect on the unity and meaning of the function system. An elaborated reflection theory in the help system is important in order to define guiding criteria for professional ethics to be used in social services as well as for the socialisation of future professional social workers. The lack of an adequate reflection theory can lead to the intrusion of ideologies that are inappropriate to the logic of the help system, such as New Public Management, which might threaten the integrity of the help system.

The structure of the article can be summarised as follows. The section ‘Functional differentiation’ gives a brief outline of Luhmann’s theory of functionally differentiated society. Following a suggestion by systems theorist Dirk Baecker (1994), The section ‘Society’s help system’ illustrates that within the Luhmannian framework the practice and professional activities of social work can be understood as a function system, namely the system of social help, or *help system*. Drawing on the work of another systems theorist, André Kieserling (2004), we will state in The section ‘Reflection Theory’ that function systems often host their own academic discipline, which not only is associated with science but mainly works as a *reflection theory* for its own function system. The section ‘The Discipline Social Work as a Reflection Theory of the Help System’ brings these different pieces together and provides some reasons for the main argument of this text that the discipline of social work is the reflection theory of the help system. The final section, Implications and Added Value for Social Work, discusses the added values of such a view of social work and some implications for both social work theory and practice.

Functional differentiation

The concept of ‘functional differentiation’ (Luhmann 2013) denotes the idea that the primary structure of modern society is characterised by the differentiation of a number of specialised communication systems such as the economy, the polity, science, education, religion, medicine, arts, the media and, as will be shown in the next section, the help system. These systems are called function systems because they each fulfil a particular function for society as a whole. The term function refers to the solution of a specific problem, for example, the societal problem of scarcity that is solved by the function system of the economy, the problem of collective decision-making that is solved by the political system or the problem of knowledge that is solved by the scientific system.

The idea of functional differentiation has its predecessors in classics of social theory such as Durkheim’s social division of labour, Simmel’s description of intersecting social circles, Weber’s characterization of modern society as a polytheism of value spheres, Parsons’ differentiation of four function systems in the AGIL scheme and Habermas’ differentiation of lifeworld and the function systems of the capitalist economy and political administration. What these early and later classics have in common is that they understand society as a differentiated entity. Luhmann’s theory continues the tradition of differentiation theory but breaks with these approaches insofar as he does not put individuals (or actions as in the case of Parsons and Habermas) at

the centre of social analysis but rather *communication* (Luhmann 1995). For Luhmann function systems are thus communication systems, and the structural characteristic of modern society is the differentiation of self-referentially closed and autonomous (with respect to their rationality) communication systems. In other words, economic communication is differentiated from scientific, political, religious and other forms of communication.

Because they focus on their specific societal reference problem, function systems have developed particular rationalities and specialised modes of observation. In this way, they can decode the enormous, historically unprecedented complexity of modern society into a small slice of social reality. Function systems reduce complexity in their environment into spheres of relevance with the help of guiding distinctions, so-called binary codes such as payment/no payment for the economic system, true/false for science, immanent/transcendent for religion or lawful/unlawful for the legal system. These codes are the lenses through which function systems observe social reality, and each one does so in its specific, unique way. For the economic system, the world appears as a collection of commodities to be purchased for a price; for science, the world appears as a collection of research objects to be analysed and studied; for the legal system, the world appears as a matter of balancing potential mutually conflicting interests. While the binary codes provide the function systems with a tool to view the world in a particular way, they cannot see what their unique perspective does not allow them to see. An economic system has no sensitivity to the truthfulness, legality, aesthetic attractiveness or sacredness of objects – only to their price and corresponding profit expectations.¹

As a structure of society, functional differentiation therefore implies a multitude of observing systems; it implies that there is neither a unity nor a congruence of perspectives (Luhmann 1989, 2013) and that there is no Archimedean standpoint from which the perspective of one function system could provide an overview of social reality in a comprehensive way that is universally valid and binding for all. Every function system has its blind spots, and as a consequence, no function system is more or less accurate in its descriptions than the others.

There is also another aspect of function systems that is of particular interest for this article: being communication systems, function systems are not constituted by human beings. However, they make use of individuals in a specific way that Luhmannian sociologists call *inclusion* (Schirmer and Michailakis 2015). Social systems include human beings in their operations as carriers of function-specific professional roles that function systems require in order to execute their respective functions: politicians in the polity, traders in the economy, priests in religion, doctors in medicine, lawyers and judges in the legal system, teachers in the education system, etc. Furthermore, each function system includes individuals through complimentary layman roles such as voters, consumers, believers, patients, defendants and students.

Inclusion is a universal normative claim of function systems not to exclude anybody (Bommes and Scherr 2000b; Luhmann 2013): from a function system's perspective, nobody should be excluded from the economy, education, political participation, religion, healthcare, etc. However, empirical reality shows that in a significant number of cases, functional differentiation leads to cumulative exclusions of individuals (Luhmann 2005 [1995]).² Social exclusion has been recognised as a paramount social problem that requires a solution on a societal level. This is the function of a relatively newly differentiated function system: the help system.

Society's help system

This section argues that there is a function system centred on social help. This argument was first brought forward by Luhmann scholar Dirk Baecker (1994) and since has been supported and to some extent developed by other authors in the German literature (Fuchs 2000; Hillebrandt 2010; Merten 2000) and Scandinavian literature (Andersen 2003, 2006; La Cour 2002; La Cour and Højlund 2008; Moe 2003; Nissen 2005). To begin, we need to distinguish this kind of help from the broader concept of help in everyday life. The help system refers to the *organised help that is provided by social work, that is public and private social services* for people identified by the system as *needy*. By way of its professionalisation, help through social work becomes a reliably expectable benefit.

As a structure of mutual expectations (between the provider and the receiver), help has a different role in modern society than it had in archaic and stratified societies. In archaic societies, help was organised through unspecified reciprocity: anybody could help anybody else and expect future help as a quid pro quo without specifying the kind, time and range. Stratified societies based help on moral and religious imperatives of charity and expectations of rewards for generosity in the afterlife (Luhmann [1973] 2005, 176). Both of these pre-modern societies depended on help as a key structural element. Historically, the help system as it has evolved in the Western world has its roots in Christian charity ('feeding the poor') and pedagogy, which themselves are built upon religious/moral ideas. However, since modern functionally differentiated society cannot be integrated by religious or moral catch-all formulas (let alone by reciprocity), other forms of help are needed (Luhmann [1973] 2005, 181). Not only is help by the help system differentiated from everyday, non-organised help by its relation to social exclusion (in contrast to helping friends with moving). It is also differentiated from charity (giving a coin to a beggar) by a formalisation of the relation between helpers and helped as well as the criteria for execution of the help provided. Accordingly, the take-off towards differentiation as a function system goes hand in hand with the development of a professional knowledge base, professional craftsmanship and professional ethics.

Nowadays, we can note that the help system has been differentiated as a function system in its own right. More concretely, the help system creates its distinct sphere of meaning and observes (i.e. distinguishes and selects events from its environment by means of) the code *help/not help* (Baecker 1994). Help communication communicates about deficit compensation (ibid., 99), and logically, this means that help is selected where the omission of help (*not help*) might have been possible (see also Moe 2003, 16). Empirically, it is organisation systems of the social services that need to decide whether particular individuals are recognised as cases eligible for help, or no (more) help (Baecker 1994, 99, 105).

The function of the help system needs to be understood in the context of functional differentiation and the ways function systems include and exclude (see previous section). As Luhmann noted in an influential essay (Luhmann [1995] 2005), it is particularly the frequently occurring circumstance of cumulative exclusions from one system to the next that cause major problems for individuals: without inclusion in a political system there is no legal support; without education there is exclusion from the economy. Mass exclusion is a subsequent problem (*Folgeproblem*) of functional differentiation, and the system of social help is a functional reaction to this subsequent problem. Some authors (Baecker 1994; Fuchs 2000; Sommerfeld 2000) therefore speak of social

help as a *secondary* function system (see also La Cour and Højlund 2008). The help system identifies, addresses and strives to solve the effects of social exclusion that cannot be taken care of by the standardised support of the welfare state (political system). Its societal function can be described as ‘management of social exclusion’ (Scherr 1999; Schirmer and Michailakis 2015; see also Wirth 2009; Bommes and Scherr 2000b). Exclusion management can take on the forms of exclusion prevention, inclusion mediation or exclusion administration, depending on the clientele and their case-specific situations. While exclusion prevention deals with people threatened with exclusion from one or more social systems (for example, working people addicted to stimulants or alcohol), inclusion mediation is intended for temporarily excluded people to process their ‘includability’, that is attractiveness to other social systems through education, therapy, etc. (examples are refugees, long-term unemployed persons, or people who recently experienced a crisis), and finally, exclusion administration focuses on cases whose regular inclusion in other social systems is ‘beyond hope’ (such as people with severe mental illness).

Exclusion management as the function of the help system takes place on an individual level. Social work organisations become active when individuals are excluded or threatened by exclusion from function systems that are vital for social existence (the economy, polity, education, healthcare, etc.). While, for example, homelessness may be the result of housing and social policy, economic recession, oversupply in the labour market, etc., the social services do not change social structures but support those people afflicted by these structures. Instead of reforming housing policy or labour markets, social services provide help for homeless individuals in terms of improving their includability.

While managing individuals’ problems regarding exclusion from other systems, the help system includes these individuals as ‘clients’. Client is the complimentary role of the help system (like the consumer in the economy or the voter in the polity); the social worker is the performance (professional) role. So for individuals whose inclusion in other systems is at stake, the help system provides for ‘substitutional inclusion’ (Baecker 1994, 103; Bommes and Scherr 2000a, 76); that is, inclusion as a client is a substitute for ‘regular’ inclusion in other systems. This kind of inclusion is meant to be temporary until it is no longer necessary (which would indicate a successful social work intervention). The help system can work on the includability of its clients but cannot include them in other systems (Fuchs 2000, 161; Wirth 2009, 414); inclusion in those systems is up to the systems themselves.

To the extent that social help is an autonomous function system and not simply an auxiliary agent for the welfare state or the legal system, the help system itself – that is, its code, programmes and reflection theories (see below) – determines what/who is a case for social help and what/who is not. Therefore, it can primarily focus on helping, and not merely on the normalisation of ‘deviant’ cases. The latter, often brought forward as a criticism against social work (not least by Habermas 1992), is the result of confusing a function system’s function (solving a problem for society) and its performance (providing support for other function systems). While the function of exclusion management aims at society (and its members) as a whole, the supposed effects of the help provided for the function systems differ from system to system. The economic system requires competent and reliable workers, the education system requires pupils who can sit still and refrain from disturbing the class, the political system requires ‘good citizens’ who do not threaten the public order – to name but a few of the performances of the help system, that is, its specific contribution to other function systems.

Reflection theory

The previous section showed that, according to Luhmannian sociology, the activities of the social services could be understood as being subject to a societal function system, just like the economy, polity, science, etc. This section presents an argument mainly developed by Luhmann scholar André Kieserling (2004), namely that most (though not all) function systems have their own academic disciplines,³ which in systems theory are called *reflection theories*.⁴ Economic theory is the reflection theory of the economy; political theory is the reflection theory of the polity; pedagogy is the reflection theory of the education system, theology is the reflection theory of the system of religion. In the next section, we will argue that the academic discipline of social work is the reflection theory of the help system. Before moving on, we need to explain the concept of reflection theory in more detail.

On the one hand, reflection theories usually consider themselves to be *scientific disciplines*. Reflection theories are, like any other academic discipline, represented by professorships and university departments which include the right of examination and promotion; they guide and carry out research with the help of scientific methods of data collection and data analysis; furthermore, they have publication outlets with peer review and impact factors.

On the other hand, reflection theories have a specific relation towards their function systems; more precisely, they are what systems theorists call *self-descriptions* of the function systems. In contrast to outside descriptions (*Fremdbeschreibungen*), which can afford to formulate more or less critical views of the system – think of a Marxist critique of the market economy – self-descriptions are compelled to be more loyal to their system (see Kieserling 2004, 49, 88). As Kieserling (ibid., 58) argues, the *raison d'être* of reflection theories is to reflect on and positively evaluate the code and societal function of their function system. In other words, reflection theories have an affirmative nature regarding their function system: legal theories appraise the law, economic theories endorse markets and rationality; political theories usually esteem the state or equivalent forms of governance. Negative evaluations of (and even indifference towards) the function would instead cause irritation rather than appreciation within the function system. Imagine a theology that challenges the existence of divine, transcendent beings, a philosophy of science that denies interest in knowledge or truth, a pedagogical theory that questions the possibility of changing individuals by means of teaching.

While theories in purely scientific disciplines submit to the code of true/untrue (Luhmann 1990), reflection theories also align with the code of their function systems (Kieserling 2004, 64). That means that they are more restricted in terms of choice of and attitudes towards research topics than, say, a sociological description. Research informed by reflection theories must satisfy claims of usefulness for their respective function systems. In order to be intelligible by the practitioners of the respective system (judges, priests, pedagogues, social workers, etc.), reflection theories strive for a semantic unity of plausibility and evidence (ibid., 59). They cannot simply convey research findings that contradict the plausibilities and values within their function systems. Kieserling argues straightforwardly that reflection theories are part of their function systems, rather than of the function system of science. From a systems-theoretical perspective, reflection theories then appear as internal subsystems of the function systems. Whereas a function system differentiates itself from its societal environment (polity and society, education and society, religion and society, help system and society – with society always being the environment, but a different one

for each function system), a reflection theory differentiates itself from the practice of its own function system (political theory and political practice, pedagogic theory and pedagogic practice, theology and religious practice, social work theory and social work practice).

Reflection theories consider the practices of their function systems (help, teaching, preaching), while *reflection theories as practices themselves* take on the practice forms of science, that is conducting and publishing research; finding and producing knowledge. From the viewpoint of the reflection theory, this internal differentiation appears as tension between theory and practice or knowledge production and knowledge application (Kieserling 2004, 72). By associating themselves with science, reflection theories legitimise their own status within their function systems. Associating themselves with their function systems, they might assert their usefulness in solving societal reference problems and develop self-descriptions based on both scientific truth and community benefit. Both associations are necessary especially because reflection theories are in charge of educating, training and socialising future practitioners in their professional fields: lawyers and judges require training in law, priests in theology, physicians in medicine and social workers in social work.

One last note on reflection theories is necessary. As already Luhmann ([1972] 2014) noted, function systems do not just host one reflection theory but several of them. Economic theory, political theory, theory of law, for instance, all consist of many different schools (or sub-theories) each competing with the others for the status of the most adequate descriptions in and of their field. So, while Keynesianism and neo-classic economic theory have differing views on how economic policy should look like, they are both part of ‘the’ reflection theory of the system of economy.⁵ The same is valid for realist and idealist theories of international politics, which strongly disagree on how to achieve security from potential enemies but share the view that security is a key goal of political theorising, which makes them reflection theories of the system of politics. Similar examples can be found for the reflection theories of other function systems.

The discipline social work as a reflection theory of the help system

If we bring together the different strands of theorising presented in the previous sections (society as differentiated in function systems, each hosting a reflection theory and social help as a function system), we can argue that the academic discipline of social work is the reflection theory of the help system. In this section, we will provide some arguments to support our claim. Reflection theories convey positive attitudes towards the function of their host system in society, which makes them basically (though not always explicitly) normative. As is true of the help system itself, help is also considered to be something good by the discipline social work. Accordingly, good help (in line with professional ethics) is better than less good help; omission of help where help is possible is the worst alternative – unless in the paradoxical case of help to self-help by ceasing help efforts, which in turn could be a particular method of providing help.

This has become very obvious in the debates for and against *evidence-based practice* (Bergmark, Bergmark, and Lundström 2011; Gambrill 1999; Otto, Polutta, and Ziegler 2009; Soydan 2012; Webb 2001). Whatever side the debaters are on, they always argue for improving the quality of help. Depending on the side, the ‘good practice’ can be achieved either by usage of the ‘best evidence available’ (Sackett et al. 1996) or by protecting professional discretion against manualization and bureaucratization (Harris 1998; Webb 2001). What the debaters all have in common is that each claims to represent

the ‘better practice’, thus the better help. By contrast, a sociological analysis might be interested in how different ways of defining what ‘good’ practice is vary across eras, across countries, across observers and stakeholders, across scholarly paradigms, etc. It is important to note that sociological analysis is neither constrained by the imperatives and normativity claims of the help system, nor forced to take sides.

Since a reflection theory is a subsystem of its hosting function system, it tends to submit to the host system’s code rather than to that of science. Sometimes there can be an outright contradiction between what is scientifically true and what is in line with the semantics of ‘help’, and in such situations, reflection theories support what is plausible in their function system. For example, one hardly finds academic social work texts that make use of evolutionary psychology to explain gender or power differences, or neuroscience to explain deviant behaviour, despite the fact that there is abundance of scientific evidence (Pinker 2002), sometimes even acquired with the ‘gold standard’ of randomised controlled trials. Similarly, statements that question the benefits of social equality would hardly be welcome in social work journals, not even when tying them to facilitation of decision-making (think not just of the military but of any organisation consisting of more than one member) or to the sociological fact that even the most democratic societies are highly stratified in order to function properly (who is going to do the low status jobs?). The implications of such findings would be unacceptable for academic social work because they would contradict professional values and be irreconcilable with human justice. One last and obviously most controversial example is prostitution. In social work, it is widely treated as a social problem that requires remedies, particularly because it is regarded as an engine for human trafficking, slavery, gender oppression, etc. Without legitimising prostitution the tiniest bit, non-normative and non-obvious,⁶ research could examine the stabilising functions of prostitution for marriage (Davis 1937). We do not aim to defend such research but use it as evidence for the argument that there are simply some things that could be studied in the social sciences but which one simply cannot consider in social work and still expect to remain a respected member of the discipline’s community.

The key to understanding all of this is that – in contrast to science, where truth and verifiable knowledge are the reference problem – social work takes sides with the marginalised, the poor, the deprived, the victims of oppressive structures, etc. and aims to promote social change to their benefit. Scholarly social work conducts research and writes for their benefit (Ife 2012), either directly by advocating their interests or indirectly by informing and educating those who work to help them. As a result, social work follows the imperatives that prevail within the function system of help, not in that of science.

There is substantial overlap between science-oriented communication and social work communication (what is ‘good’ help can also be true, and vice versa), but in potential cases of conflict, the help code is superior to the scientific code in social work. As shown in the previous section, this is neither a peculiarity of social work nor is it a weakness – it is simply a structural characteristic of a reflection theory (more on this in the next section).

While most of the scholarly practice taking place in the context of academic social work (conducting research, publishing, grant applications, PhD supervision, etc.), there is always the – sometimes latent, often manifest – link between academic practice and professional practice (Parton 2000). Whatever academics write is almost always expected to have some relevance to practice in some way. This is important for the legitimacy of the reflection theory in its function system; likewise, this legitimacy is

underpinned by attempts to connect the methodologies of the reflection theory more closely to the scientific canon, as can be seen in recent debates about whether social work is or should be a science (Brekke 2012, 2014; Merten, Sommerfeld, and Koditek 1996; Staub-Bernasconi 2007). On the other hand, however, the functional differentiation between the reflection theory and the professional activity is an explanation of what is often complained to be a suboptimal relation between theory and practice (Michailakis and Schirmer 2014).

Reflection theories tend to overstate the impact they have (or ought to have) on society and other function systems. For example, in textbooks one often reads that social work has the mandate to solve social problems and promote social change (see e.g. Healy 2001; Staub-Bernasconi 2007). Certainly, there is no doubt that social workers in their daily work deal with social problems and their consequences, and the more they consider themselves as social *pedagogues* (particularly in continental Europe), they engage in social change by educating and helping to empower their clients. However, it would be easy to argue that social problems are solved and social change is achieved by other systems than the help system. Economists might claim that capitalism and the liberalisation of markets have reduced global poverty and raised global living standards; scientists might claim that their innovation and advances have facilitated a more comfortable lifestyle, survival, longevity, mobility and communication; politicians (as well as administrators and planners) might claim that their political programmes have provided for inclusion, equality, employment, etc. We should mention in particular social mass movements such as the bourgeois movement (French Revolution), labour movement (welfare state), suffragettes (women's political inclusion) and various minority movements which, at least on the macro-level, forced dominant classes, power structures or discourses to give way, thereby enabling change. From this ad hoc comparative perspective, one might wonder why social work should be the engine of social problem-solving and social change. Our position is not to question the efforts and successes of social work on behalf of this – quite the contrary. Our argument is rather that reflection theories typically overestimate the function and its positive effects on society as a whole, and social work (being the reflection theory of the help system) does not differ in this respect from other reflection theories of other function systems.

Put roughly, while liberal economists think more market is good for society and that social problems are the result of too little market, political theorists in contrast believe that more governance is good for society while social problems are the effect of too little governance, that is, too much *laissez-faire* towards other systems. In a similar vein, social work scholars assume that because there is too much injustice in the world, more help (understood as motivation, activation, empowerment, illumination, solidarity, equality) is needed to solve the problems. What all these views have in common is that the source of the problems is considered to be outside the function system while the solution is to be found inside it.

Implications and added value for social work

The presented argument is built consistently within in the framework of Luhmannian systems theory. Such a point of departure has its advantages as well as limitations. However, in order to evaluate these, the measure is not of positivist-objectivist kind in terms of which framework is closer to 'objective truth' than others but it is a heuristic one: what insights does a certain framework allow us to see, and what practical value does it have? The Luhmannian approach neither provides insights into how to improve

social work practice, nor does it provide (normative) accounts on what ‘good practice’ is. The argument of this article is a sociological one, but it offers at least threefold added value for social work, both in terms of discipline and practice. Considering the discipline social work as a reflection theory provides new answers to old questions in the self-reflection of the help system: (1) the identity question, (2) the question of academization/scientification and (3) the question of the relation between theory and practice.

(1) The identity question is as old as the professional practice itself: What is social work about? What are its unity (what is common to all social workers) and its difference (what is genuine about social workers in comparison with psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, pedagogues, sociologists)? Similarly, the academic discipline is torn by its uncertain identity: whether it ought to be a science-based action theory to guide practitioners (Brekke 2014; Miller 2001; Obrecht 1996), a critical social science of social problems and social change (Dominelli 2002; Fook 2002) or even a ‘discipline without qualities’ as Kleve (2007) suggests in allusion to Robert Musil’s famous novel. The sociological answer to the identity question, based on Luhmannian systems theory, is twofold: first, there is the help system, which as a function system of society fulfils an exclusive function (exclusion management) in an autonomous way. With its focus on help, this system offers a perspective on society and social problems that is distinct from that of other professions and other function systems. Second, if we locate the discipline of social work as a subsystem within the help system, the identity problem looks less severe because, as a reflection theory, its tasks and its exclusivity (in contrast to neighbouring disciplines) are given by the functional logic of the help system. Obviously, being classified as a reflection theory, this does not entail any kind of degradation – that is, that social work was not (yet) good enough to meet the requirements of being a full-fledged and fully respected science (whatever that might be). On the contrary, reflection theories are crucial to their function systems for boundary management. They are important gatekeepers for fending off intrusions by other function systems (not least those of the economy, politics and positivist science) that tend to impose their own codes on the logic of the help system. This has become an issue in particular in the context of outsourcing formerly public social services to the private sector. Private social care organisations (unless they are NPOs) strive for economic profit. The ‘good help’ then becomes relegated to an interchangeable means of profit, not an end in itself as the professional ethics of the help system would require (see Gethin-Jones 2012). A reflection theory needs to formulate principles and programmes to safeguard the fulfilment of the societal function of its system. Similarly, the recent rise of New Public Management, which has gained in popularity among welfare administrators who are looking for ways to reduce costs and maintain a belief in the efficiency increases that NPM keeps promising, could be interpreted as a failure of social work to focus too much on the competition with other research disciplines and too little on defending the integrity of the function system. This leads us to the second point.

(2) Similarly to the identity question, the aspiration towards academization and scientization is also almost as old as the profession itself. While academization, that is the establishment of the discipline at universities, is useful in terms of legitimising the systems-internal differentiation between practice and reflection theory, the aspiration of scientization runs contrary to the *raison d’être* of the discipline. We certainly do not question the necessity of a (interdisciplinary) scientific foundation for the knowledge base of social work professionals. However, we argue that attempts to completely

transform social work into an empirical science – be it bio-psycho-social natural-science-style positivism or a sociology of inequality and social problems – would imply abandoning the reflective function it has for the help system. The more social work turned into a positivist natural science, the more it would find evidence and contribute to its own knowledge base but the less it would be able to interpret and normatively evaluate the meaning of all this evidence for practitioners, who not only need to follow programmes but, at least equally important, attach meaning to it. This meaning can only come from the help system itself. If, on the other hand, social work tried to turn into an empirical science of social inequality and social problems, the more difficult it would be to remain distinct from sociology. The latter situation has led some commentators to reject the necessity of social work in the first place (for a Swedish case see Börjeson cited in Brante 1987, 41), arguing that the discipline should be abolished because it could not keep up with sociology. We find that such statements miss the point completely because sociology cannot replace social work, for the simple but nonetheless intricate reason that social work as reflection theory has a different function than a (purely) scientific discipline. While both sociology and social work make statements about inequality and social problems, the associated meanings are completely different (a matter of truth or a matter of help and assistance).

(3) Finally, regarding the discipline social work as a reflection theory of the help system gives a new interpretation to the enduring conflict between theory and practice. In our view, the often observed dysfunctional or problematic ‘transfer’ from theory/research to practice is based on misleading expectations. As a reflection theory, the usefulness of practice lies scarcely in empirical findings and their translation into concrete guidelines for practitioners. Quite the contrary – most practitioners do not want to sacrifice their professional discretion; they consider social work as an art rather than as assembly line work in the best Taylorist-Fordist sense. The usefulness of the “theory” comes to the fore especially in the education of future social work practitioners. In their training, they learn not just a lot of facts and practical methods. A key function of training is socialisation in the core values, creation of meaning and provision of a normative compass for what “good practice” is. Similarly, with its academic practice (papers, books, lectures, etc.) as reflection theory, the discipline social work can prevent hardened professional practitioners from turning into cynics over their long career when they constantly have to deal with interprofessional, political or client-related obstacles.

One last thought on the relation between theory and practice – as academic practice, a reflection theory entails the conduct of research, both empirical and theoretical. While this kind of research aligns itself with the scientific system (true/false), it is subject to the code of its function system (help/not help), which means that both topics and approaches are restricted, as is argued in the section Reflection Theory. To maintain its internal differentiation from professional practice, a reflection theory as academic discipline requires a certain amount of relative autonomy from professional practice. The discipline itself does not practice help; it researches, publishes, debates. On the other hand, the relative autonomy needs to be mutual. Subordination of one to the other (when the discipline prescribes how practitioners should do their work, or vice versa, when practice defines what research the discipline needs to conduct) is dysfunctional for the system itself. Relative autonomy should not be confused with autarchy, as both are parts within and are oriented towards the same function system. In this regard, they share the same identity.

Notes

1. This is, of course, different for organisation systems and for individuals, which/who have the ability to change perspectives and have to adjust to multiperspectivity.
2. As has been pointed out by some authors (Nassehi and Nollmann 1997; Schirmer and Michailakis 2015), it is less the universalistic semantics of function systems than the restrictive membership practices of organisations that are the key engines of exclusion.
3. Academic discipline refers to a system of concepts and methodological rules employed in the endeavour to interpret and explain phenomena that result in a specific body of knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge is hosted in academic departments.
4. On the concept of reflection theory, see also the works of Roar Hagen (2006), 169–192.
5. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this example.
6. In the sense of Randall Collins' non-obvious sociology (Collins 1982).

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