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Experiencing and researching data system and change in a child welfare unit – a practice research approach

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Abstract

In this paper a case of practice research is discussed with a manifold focus on change. What did the data system change, what did the research change, and what is the scope of change in practice research? The research presented here took place during 2008 – 2011. Data was collected during a four month period in 2008-2009 when a new client data system was taken into use in child welfare services in the city of Helsinki. The research was done in a small unit which provides social services and aimed at analyzing how change affects agency and central actors and how social work was practiced during the data system change. The roles of a practitioner (social worker) and researcher were combined during the field period. More theorizing took place after the intensive field period.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part covers a short description of the practical activities during the field period, the researcher's co-operation with team members in the unit and initiatives taken by the researcher. The second part concentrates on the methods and tools that were used when organizing and analyzing the collected data. Furthermore it concentrates on the challenges faced when the multifaceted data from the field was organized and analyzed. The questions of agency and action theories are central.

The third part of this paper scrutinizes this example of practice research in a methodological context. It analyses the approach applied by elucidating the methodological standpoints and the critical elements embedded, and reflects on the implications of this approach in and for practice.

1. **The Data System and the Researcher enter the Practice**

The purpose of the research was to catch a dense picture of a period of Information technology change in a child welfare unit. Research questions concerned agency; how the change affected social workers and other actors and their agency. Furthermore, research interests considered how social work was practiced during the time of data system change.

The researcher had deputized a few months as a social worker in this child welfare unit before starting the field period for systematic data assembling there. Before entering this field period, agreement was made with the manager of the unit, that the researcher would continue her responsibilities with client work and combine the roles of a practitioner and researcher during a four months period. Two months of this was financed by applying for special assets that city of Helsinki had budgeted for data system change. This allowed more flexibility in recruiting staff but

meant no more resources. The research plan discussed and formed in these negotiations offered flexibility during the field period so that the researcher could meet the needs of the unit and still hold her research focus. The choice not to use a narrow frame allowed the researcher to assemble a multifaceted and rich data. The field period of four months included two months time to prepare for data system change, during that time both the old client data system and the new one - still under construction - were in use. During the last two months only the new data system could be used in client work, the old system could only be used to look at the old client documentation.

Written data considering the change consists of decisions made on various organizational levels and information and instructions addressed to social workers. Data collected by participatory observation was transcribed. Data consists also of material produced when trying to manage the change. As there had been a high turn-over of social workers at that unit it was not even clear who were the clients that social workers were responsible for. In order to be able to move the client information to the new data system there was an urgent need to clarify the clientele. Therefore data includes concrete material of different kind of client lists and statistics. While finding out the state of active clients, there was also a need to build up a new system for distribution of work. As practically the whole team was new there was need to define the work roles more clearly and for that purpose work processes were described together with team members. As these tasks fit the research frame, the researcher had responsibility in doing these together with the team members. Even these ready processes and observations of what was done to achieve a common understanding of work processes are included in data. The data gathered in form of participating observation describes not only the data system change but also the every-day work in a unit of 7 workers that received approximately 3 – 5 new notices of child welfare cases a week.

2. Organizing and Analyzing the Data – what Methods and Tools were Used

As the data consisted of various elements of different character its manageability was not good to begin with. The data was rich and interesting but hard to handle. As the researcher had a close emotional connection to data that could be useful in further analysis, too mechanical tools were avoided when organizing the data to further analysis. Illustrations and tables of several kinds were used in order to find out what kind of scientific tool might be suitable. After this preliminary thematic work tools provided by semiotic sociology were taken into use. Semiotic sociology is a metatheory of intelligibility of reality and about how it is socially produced (Sulkunen, 1997, 17-18). By intelligibility of reality is meant interaction between meaning giving and interpreting where not only descriptions of reality are produced but also values are put on these descriptions. According to theory reality appears in texts or speeches, wherein speaker and receiver positions are constructed. After the decision in favor of the semiotic sociology aktant-modell (Korhonen & Oksanen, 1997, 57) was used to construct the stories that described the period of change. The concept aktant refers to a category of relations that is common in all narratives. The core of the model is the relation between a subject and an object; the other actors are grouping around these central actors. There usually is a sender who gives the subject a task, motivating the subject to reach for the object and defining the values for action. Other actors have either a helping or resisting role. This part of analysis resulted four different intersecting and parallel stories each with a specific theme.
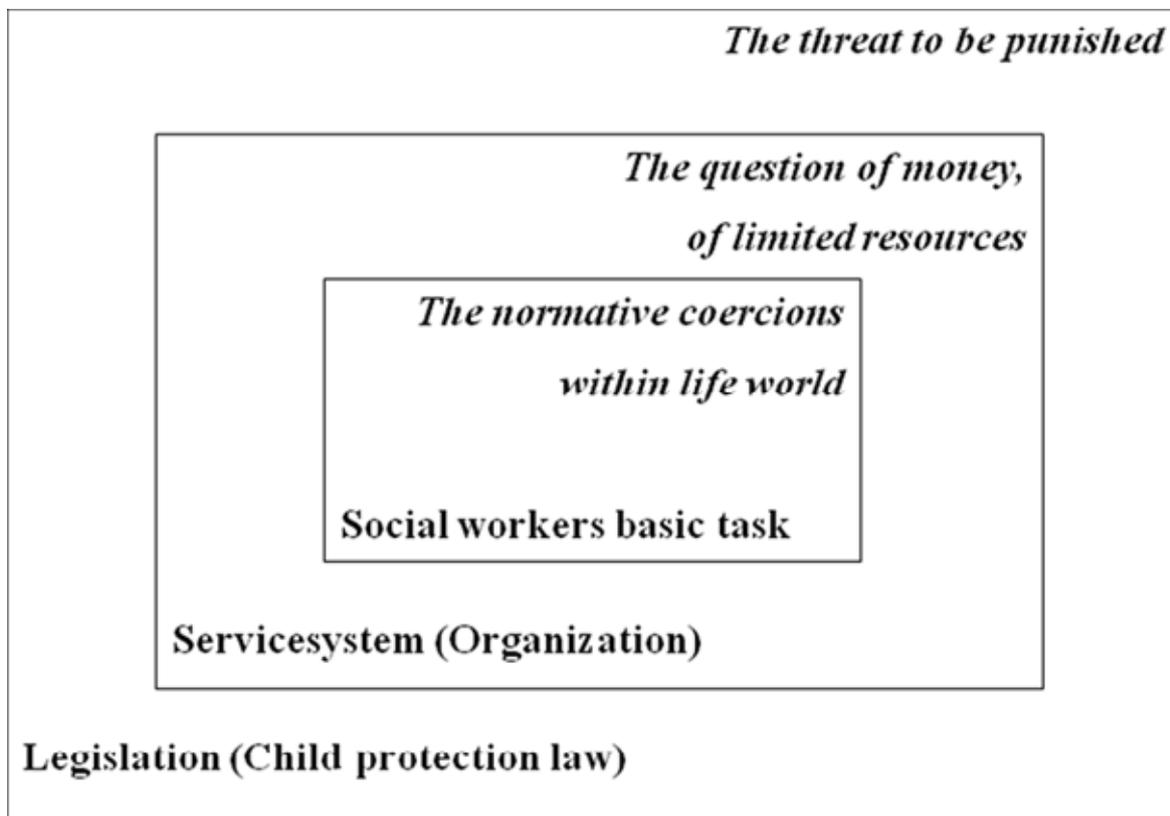
The first story is called managing social work in child protection with decisions, notices and directions. In this story organizational responsibilities percolate down to the horizontal level. The

second story illustrates the situation with high turnover of staff and its consequences for work practices. The whole team of 7 workers was practically new in the autumn 2008 when the concrete preparations for data system change led by the central organization began. This working team had suffered of shortage and high turnover of social workers for several years. Even if this was an extreme situation, this kind of problems are common in Finland as can be read from statistics (Kumpulainen, 2009). The third story is about legislation. The new child welfare act was enacted in Finland 1.1.2008. In comparison to the previous law this act emphasizes the role of social worker as responsible for leading the client processes. There is also a strong emphasis on documentation that is embedded in the detailed child protection process. This story consists of two parallel stories, the ideal one – how the legislator had planned the process and the other that described the actual process when the new child welfare act was conducted in the organizational context during the data system change. The fourth story is about children in client data bases.

On basis of these four stories the central actors of change were detected. To analyze the agency of social worker was already planned while entering the field. The relevance of dissecting also data system as an actor became clear first during the field period. On basis of data these two actors were discussed and their agency theorized. This gave also the basis of theorizing on social workers space of agency (Alasuutari, 2007; Svensson et. al. 2008). Even though the research was done in a child protection unit, the child remained silent in the stories or was narrowed down to a remark or to a text in data base. In order to better understand why this was the case even child's agency was discussed. The concept of subject position (Törrönen, 2000, 243) was used in order to look at all these actors (social worker, data system and child) concerning the spatial, temporal and positional aspects of their agency. The analysis of central agents and their agency roused further questions. Questions concerned observed tension between these agents and the unintended consequences of change. The research considering information technology change in a child protection unit raised an aching question of unintended consequences. Such consequences were detected when data system change crashed with several other changes. The central agents, client data system and social worker confronted each other in the fields of legislation, organization and social workers' basic task. The elements of these fields were present in the data and urged to be disclosed. There was tension to be detected in these fields and specifically between two central actors of the study, social worker and data system. This tension was hypothesized to be aroused by the presence of elements that have their origin in new public management. The fields and interwoven contexts detected from data had interesting similarities with the model of coercions that Heiskala (2000) has developed. Heiskala has combined semiotic sociology (considering mainly signs, symbols) with Habermas (1987) description of society. By doing this Heiskala has presented a three-dimensional model of coercions that affect agents in society. Firstly, there are the coercions that have their origin in legislation. The legislation embodies in the threat to be punished. Secondly, there are the coercions that have their origin in financial resources, the symbol being money. The central question is how the limited resources are used. Thirdly, according to Heiskala, there are the normative coercions within life world. These coercions are ritually confirmed symbols that are learned through socialization. In picture 1. the fields detected from the data are combined with Heiskalas model of coercions. The hypothesis considering the elements of new public management is illustrated as a stream surrounding all these fields and contexts.

Picture 1. Fields of tension

~~~~~~~~The flow of new public management~~~~~~~~~

> *The threat to be punished*
>
> > *The question of money,*
> > *of limited resources*
> >
> > > *The normative coercions*
> > > *within life world*
> > >
> > > Social workers basic task
> >
> > Servicesystem (Organization)
>
> Legislation (Child protection law)

~~~~~~~~The flow of new public management~~~~~~~~~

The researcher approached the fields described above by asking whether new public management has taken the role of theory-in use in these fields. In doing this Argyris and Schöns (1978, 1996) theoretical work was used as base. They have argued that there are two kinds of theories of action: *"Espoused theories are those that an individual claims to follow. Theories-in-use are those that can be inferred from action."* The models they have developed include both individual and organizational levels. Questions of learning and reflection are central elements of these theories. As learning is considered, they distinguish two ways of learning: single-loop learning and double-loop learning. *"By single-loop learning we mean instrumental learning that changes strategies of action or assumptions underlying strategies in ways that leave the values of a theory of action unchanged."* s. 20 *"By double-loop learning we mean learning that results in a change in the values of theory-in-use, as well as in its strategies and assumptions"* s. 21. As individuals and organizations are concerned they are interdependent with each other. This interdependence encompasses both the perspectives of learning and theory-in-use. Single-loop learning and doubleloop learning are part of larger models developed by Argyris and Schön. In order to make these concepts useful in the analysis of the fields presented previously, some of the central

elements labeled as models I (here referred as vertical) and II (as dialogical) are summoned up in table 1. The governing values and therefore also the strategies of action differ in these two models. Learning is part of the consequences of actions as well as behavior and effects on efficiency. Single-loop learning is typical for model I. In model II the probability for double-loop learning is increased. The question of learning is vital in these models as single-loop learning doesn't affect the governing values of action.

Table 1. Argyris & Schöns models I and II and the data system change in child welfare

	Model I The vertical model	Model II The dialogical model
Governing values	Goals oriented information Win, do not lose Negative feelings and resistance is suppressed Rationality is emphasised	Valid information Free and informed choice Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of its implementation
Strategies	Unilateral control of environment and tasks Unilateral protection of self and others Unillustrated attributions and evaluations Treating the data systems views as obviously correct	Participation in design and implementation of action Sharing control Attribution and evaluation illustrated with relatively directly observable data Discussing conflicting view Encouraging public testing of evaluations
Consequences:		
1. Behaviour	Defensive interpersonal and group relationships Defensive norms Low freedom of choice	Minimally defensive relationships Freedom of choice
2. Learning	Little public testing of ideas Much testing of theories privately Reduced production of valid information Single-loop learning	Disconfirmable processes Increased likelihood of double-loop learning Frequent public testing of theories Double-loop-learning
3. Efficiency	Long term decrease in efficiency	Long term increase in efficiency

In each of the fields described earlier the researcher examined how the central actors of this research (social worker and data system) related to the coercions that were present at the field in question. Also the models of theories-in-use were discussed, whether there were elements that indicate model I or model II. This analysis indicated that NPM has a strong affect on the theory-in-use in child welfare in this unit. Further research is needed in order to find out how the situation is in general in Finland.

The findings of this research indicate that social workers agency is controlled by legislation and organization. As well as being target of legislators and organizations control, the social worker is also expected to lead the processes in child welfare. This results to a situation of backlog of work and many responsibilities. Due to these factors there is very minimal space left for reflection. Reflection would be the necessary element in achieving a useful dynamic between espoused theories and theories-in-use as well as making use of the models I and II described above. In this research the new data system took a role of actor by requiring and enabling certain detailed processes. In the situation of e.g. limited staff the advantages of a new client data system were partially wasted and also had negative effects for basic task. Already in the short period of time when the new data system had been in use, it had formed the work processes so that the formal procedure was more central at the cost of the content. This was the case as the system was used by social workers who were not many enough to cope with a laborious and time consuming system as a part of their work. The negative effects may be cumulative as the system has many measuring functions that are used by management. As the system demands, more action is directed to empty procedures that produce fine statistics. Argyris (1980, 17) refers to this kind of situations:

> *"Under these conditions people resign themselves to the belief that systems are not for double-loop learning. This resignation may make life easier for those participants choosing to be uninvolved and minimally responsible. They create a double bind for those who choose to be responsible and involved in the health of the system. If they demonstrate and criticize the O-I learning system, they run the risk of opening up the organization's Pandora's box. If they hide the issues, they violate their own sense of integrity and responsibility."*

This example of research scrutinized in the methodological context

In this final part this example of research is scrutinized methodologically. This part is written in a form of dialogue. The researcher (Raija) is reflecting upon her own role as a researcher. The professor in practice research in social work (Ilse) is putting this research in a broader context.

Raija:

The choices made before entering the field proved to be in many ways useful. Action research was chosen to function as a loose methodological frame. This choice allowed the use of several different approaches in action research (Dewey, 2006; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Huttunen & Heikkinen, 1999) as well as openness to other methodologies such as practice research in social work (Saurama & Julkunen 2009) and expansive learning at work (Engeström, 2004). It was therefore natural in all phases of research to endeavor to learn more about different methodologies that could be useful in this particular research when searching answers to research questions.

I like to think of methodology as a set of tools. This view gives an opportunity to see beyond the scientific tradition and raise the question of the specific tools that can be used in research that has its focus in and on practice. Along with the methodological approaches described shortly above I experience that I have a useful methodological toolbox after long working experience in social services. My varied education and different organizational roles (e.g. assistant, coach, leader, expert, manager, supervisor) during over 20 years gave not only perspectives but also practical tools in order to take initiative during the field period in this research. Also the way of finding this kind of research opportunity might not be easy without sufficient understanding of how organizations and service system function. Maybe the most significant with this kind of experience is that it helps to recognize the critical moments when to make an active move while being part of the practical activity. Examples of this kind of initiatives taken during the field period were to take an active role in describing the work processes in co-operation with team members and developing a new system for the distribution of work in the team. When analyzing the data and theorizing further the possibility to make use of elaborate supervision has been vital and has given nourishment for the work that needs to be done by the researcher alone. An important element during the analysis has also been the occasions when the preliminary results have been discussed with the staff of the researched unit.

Ilse:

Knowledge has a prospective character, and the research design has a generative perspective. The research methodology is a source as well as a medium, and the methodological perspectives are more explicitly evaluated and developed during the process. (cf. Julkunen 2011, forthcoming) Taking Pragmatism as a starting point we argue that knowledge is clearly related to action (Dewey 1931). The critical point is how we look at action in the knowledge-production process. In what way is action a purpose and an object? A Swedish researcher in information systems (IS), Göran Goldkuhl (2008), distinguished three functional divisions in IS from a socio-pragmatic perspective. 1) Referential pragmatism describes the world, the activities and actions as well as the actors in it, and the conditions for and results of the actions; it is provisional knowledge, knowledge about action, which is the object. 2) Functional pragmatism views knowledge as a way of improving practice: practice is still in a state of becoming and knowledge should be useful. Knowledge is prescriptive in character. It is knowledge for action, the action being the purpose. 3) Methodological pragmatism is based on the fact that we learn about practice through action, and that the true nature of the phenomenon is revealed when we try to change it. It is prospective knowledge achieved through action, as action is the source and the medium.

Raija:

In the following I reflect upon my own role as a researcher through definitions of pragmatism described above. The research was a process involving alternative periods of field practice and research – analysing, conceptualising and theorising. The aim of the study was to acquire knowledge through action, and could therefore be categorised as functional pragmatism: knowledge is seen as a way of improving practice and action is both the source and the medium. In the beginning of this study elements of functional pragmatism were more present; there was a practical need of knowledge for action. Towards the end of the study elements of methodological pragmatism became more strongly involved: there was need to achieve knowledge through action. The aim was not to solely build and produce knowledge for a specific practice but to generate knowledge through different practices. To conclude my researcher role made use of a mixture of functional and methodological pragmatism.

Ilse:

It seems to be characteristic of practice-based knowledge that it is personally experienced. Strauss (1993, cf. Mead) argues that the corporeality of knowledge means that no action is possible without a body, that there is no divide between the external and interior worlds, and that self-consciousness is a cornerstone in professional practice. This concerns all the actors - researchers, practitioners and users - who enter into action. By continuously reconstructing the conceptions we understand the present and project forward into the future in order to be able to act. Thought processes make reconceptualisation possible and routines can be a possibility, as routines are a central feature in Dewey´s action scheme (1922): when it breaks down reflection is called into play in order to get the action going again. In the same sense Archer (2003) talks of actor's internal conversation as a medium between agency and stucture.

Conceptualisation requires much expertise though from the researcher: it calls for methods of thinking learned in scientific research, systematisation and research logic, approved methodological practice and good background knowledge of the relevant literature. Most of all, however, it requires a research and learning community and testing of knowledge formation in practice. Not surprisingly, Hakkarainen, Lonka and Lipponen (1999) point out that meta-conceptual awareness comes only through active involvement in the research process. This points to Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, which so eloquently describes the different standpoints we should take:

> To do this, one has to situate oneself within real activity as such, that is in the practical relation to the world, the preoccupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as a spectacle. It is possible to step down from the sovereign viewpoint from which objectivist idealism orders the world, but without having to abandon to it the "active aspect" of apprehension of the world by reducing knowledge to a mere recording. (Bourdieu 1990, 52)

Two concepts, developed by John Dewey and Georg Herbert Mead, are of significance in understanding the emergent, becoming nature of practice: transactionality and corporeality. They emphasise the notion that entities, including humans, gain meaning through interacting. The interaction enhances the process of co-becoming and converges the methodological ambitions of process-oriented approaches to the social sciences (Miettinen et al 2009). In this study the researcher took an active role during the field period in describing the work processes in co-operation with team members and developing a new system for the distribution of work in the team. Her long practice experience enlarged also her methodological toolbox. Recognizing that emotional and practical experience is a necessary condition for developing a more connected knowing (Mezirow 2000; Fook & Agaland 2010)

Behind Schöns development of the model for the reflective practitioner was his recognition of a gap between the espoused theory (the ideas which we consciously believe we are working from) and the theory in use (the ideas which are embedded in what we actually do) . His aim was to create a model by which professionals could develop their own practice theory by reflecting on their experience. By creating knowledge through reflection he was posing an alternative to the

ruling espistemology which tended to privilege knowledge created through a more objective research process. In this sense, Schöns model becomes a model for both improvement of practice but also for the creation of theory directly from practice experience.

Raija:

I feel that Schöns description of swampy lowlands meets very well my experience from the intensive period of experiencing and researching data system and change in a child welfare unit:

> *"In the varied topograpfy of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern. - - There are those who choose the swampy lowlands. They deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems and, when asked to describe their methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through."* Schön (1983, 42, 43)

Even though think that the field period was a rich experience as such, there is a deeper meaning with involvement in confusing messes and that has to do with the methodological challenges. The development of new technology and the implementation of ICT in social services have evoked multidimensional phenomena. On basis of the results of this research there's a need to look simultaneously at action and at the contextual structures within which the action occurs. According to Archer (2003) and Layder (1998) it is important to look at the agency in relation to structures. These questions are methodologically demanding as Layder points out: *"The whole point of a focus on the relations between agency and structure in research is to underline their simultaneous implication in each other – to trace their actual interpenetrations and linkages – and not to abandon this task because of a methodological problem."* (Layder, 1998, 145)

Ilse:

In this study the researcher took the role of a reflection- in – action and through that revealed that in fact the theory-in-use was not practice theories as such in social work but New Public Managament that then seems to have conquered over the space of social workers agency. The negative effects when implementing the new data system in social work practice can be partially explained with NPM's central role as a theory-in-use in the fields of legislation, organization and social worker's basic task. But what does this result mean for the practice? How can practice learn from this? There is a recent discussion on the issue of scale and wider influence in research (Reason 2001; Ennals 2005; Gustavsen 1998; Gustavsen 2001; Chen 2005). It raises questions about the connectedness between research and a broader impact. What is the scale of practice research and how is it connected to change? One way of examining research connectedness is to elucidate the methodology and the different forms of research and clarify the scope of research. Reason and Torbert (2001) has differentiated the scope range through the division of first-person inquiry, second-person inquiry and third-person inquiry. First-person inquiry refers to the reflective researcher who brings inquiry into everyday practice seeing research informing the practice and themselves as perhaps self-appointed change agents. Second-person inquiry is a more co-operated inquiry in which a face-to-face group of co-reseachers engage together in cycles

of action and reflection through research. The third-person inquiry goes further than this and tries to contribute into wider movements. These distinctions set the question of learning into the forefront. Can change be differentiated through the scope of single, double with also including the critical triple-loop learning?

Single-loop learning consists of becoming better at doing what you can already do. Thus the actions involved that exist in this context must be of identifiable types. Double-loop learning on the other hand, means that the individual involved is aware and can then take the context into consideration in the learning process. Triple-loop learning puts the question of concrete change into focus. This means creating or accepting new values in the theory- in-use as well as new strategies in the learning process (Bateson, 1987). On one side learning within the given context does not work because, even if the persons change the values and strategies in the theory-in- use, this does not necessary result in the expected consequences. On the other hand, the practitioners may see the context as given and unchangeable.

Despite emphasis on learning and knowledge creation, many practitioners feel they are trapped in a vicious cycle. Practitioners are not rewarded for reflecting on their work, for reading and listening to what others have to say, for systematising and sharing the experiences so others can critique the practice, both within our institutions and in the broader development community. Social work is working with ever more ambitious agendas, increasing numbers of relevant actors and stakeholders, and more complex change processes. As we learn by doing, real learning becomes even more important. Yet increased complexity increases demands on staff and strains existing infrastructure, meaning there is even less time for reflection and learning. Can practice research serve as a alternative and supporting strategy? In this case, the research results were discussed within the team, but as such this does not suffice. The results need to be discussed outside the community.

Practice research combines an interest in describing, explaining and theorising on practice (referential pragmatism), using knowledge as a means of improving practice (functional pragmatism) and active participation in testing and exploring new ways of working (methodological pragmatism) (cf Goldkuhl 2007, 2008). It is a question of carrying out rigorous and worthwhile research, and making sure that the outcomes are relevant in and for practice while at the same time expanding and promoting general knowledge. This stretches the research process from co-production to co-evolution. Helga Nowotny (2006) points out the co-evolutive aspects of science, claiming that validity should be repeatedly tested not only within the practice but also outside the community in different networks. Hence, the main problem is not the locality of knowledge, but how we treat that local knowledge.

Raija:

In order to research further the phenomena linked with the use of ICT in social services I have planned a follow-up study to this research. Firstly, as the data in this research considered the information technology change of one single unit, I now pursue to assemble data that concerns the whole organization. The research hypotheses are based on the detected contradictions in the work of this researched unit. Secondly, I'm planning to use these findings in other organizational contexts too and strive to find about how these issues are experienced in other municipalities in Swedish speaking Finland.

The follow up study is based on the findings concerning the period of change when a new data system was taken into use in child protection in the city of Helsinki. In this study I hypothesize that this new data system has affected the work processes in unpredicted and unintended ways in the whole organization. With my research questions I urge to find out the present stage of the work processes and about the role the data system now has in these processes. Both vertical and horizontal levels in organizational context are taken into consideration. As the data for this research was assembled from one unit and aimed at a thick description, this research will have the emphasis on all the units being responsible for child protection in the city of Helsinki.

The practical target of this study is to increase understanding of the needs of social work when information and communication technology is used in social services. Therefore this research strives not only to describe the situation but also to work for a change. In order to make an impact I pursue an active interaction throughout the research process in organizational and interdisciplinary contexts. The aim of the research can be formulated in two specific questions: What is the stage of work processes in social services in relation to ICT? What can be done to increase organizational (vertical and horizontal levels) and interdisciplinary understanding when it comes to implementation of ICT in social services?

Ilse:

The aim in practice research is to find forms of knowledge processing that aim beyond provisional knowledge. For knowledge to be actionable it has to be embedded in professional practice on the one hand, and to take a critical stance on the other. The point of departure is that real operational change requires the involvement and participation of several different stakeholders and actors. The knowledge interest in social-work-practice research lies in practices and their development. The emphasis is on interaction and a balanced discussion between different parties in order to enable change. Learning in a community of practice involves learning by doing, generating meanings, the formation of identity and participation in the community (Wenger 1998). Thus, research in a community may bring about change in professional practice, but the critical element is that the local knowledge is reflected and discussed outside the practice and in different networks.

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