

Theme: Ethnographies as legitimation

## **Researching social work practice using participant observation and a practice research approach**

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The presentation will focus on how the ethnographic method participant observation had crucial significance for the way a *practice research* (Uggerhøj 1984) project studied the daily work practice and working conditions of caseworkers at social services departments for children and family services in Denmark.

The purpose of the project was to study how caseworkers manage their practice with children and youth in vulnerable positions and further shed light on conditions that influenced their work practice. Further, it was to provide knowledge that was relevant and usable for the caseworkers in qualifying practice.

The project, that lasted 5 years, had an explorative research approach of ethnographic case studies in two large municipalities in Denmark, where we conducted fieldwork in their social service departments of children and family services. The fieldwork consisted of several research methods: Participant observation (daily for eight month in 1 municipality and six month in the other); qualitative individual semi-structured interviews with caseworkers, managers, young people and their parents plus a number of focus group discussions with all the caseworkers.

Our ethnographic approach is inspired by a meaning-making approach where focus is on describing and understanding the meaning producing processes that takes place in organizations (Moesby-Jensen & Schjellerup Nielsen, 2011; Ybema et al 2009). The ethnographic and practice research approach (see Uggerhøj, 2012:84), which in this project is characterized by the proximity to the

field – both in form of partnerships with the municipalities and the ethnographic fieldwork – has been productive for understanding what takes place in practices. This has allowed us to focus on social work practice as a phenomenon. Our approach was also characterized by a democratization of the research process due to our involvement of the caseworkers throughout the research project. Thus, the research design had a crucial impact, regarding not only making empirical analysis usable for social work practice, but also regarding the inclusion of the research project as input for individual and shared reflection for the social workers.

Long-term daily close up fieldwork contributed to an understanding of caseworkers practice with children, youth and their families in vulnerable positions. We will argue that the researchers close up and daily presence in the natural setting of caseworkers in social service departments creates special productive conditions for practice-based knowledge to be collected and analyzed. Additional to arguing that the ethnographic method participant observation has special potential in the social work field we will discuss other aspects of ethnographic fieldwork. For example, how the practice research approach in this project meant involving the caseworkers in choosing the research themes; how we by classic ethnographic means used ourselves as a tool and among other things developed an approach that allowed us to do participant observation in our study of caseworkers practice in one-person offices. In addition, we created learning possibilities for the caseworkers to reflect and discuss during the study, and by returning to the field (the social services departments) and presenting and discussing our empirical analysis; we facilitated local research-based inputs for the municipalities organizational development and learning process – all together significant elements of our combined ethnographic and practice research approach.