

Review of: **“Performing Social Work – Competence, orderings, spaces and objects”**. Dissertation submitted for PhD. Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen. Torben Elgaard Jensen 2001.

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I may have missed important points while reading the dissertation **“Performing Social Work – Competence, orderings, spaces and objects”** by Torben Elgaard. At the same time I found the dissertation very inspiring. But why did I have the experience of missing some of the important points, while I still found the dissertation very inspiring?

The difficult aspect of the dissertation is that it has a radical conclusion on the phenomena of competence in social work. The author sees competence in social work as involving both human and non-human entities. He refuses to talk about competence in social work solely in terms of psychological entities understood as human bodies, feelings and mentalities and argues that *“a host of non-human entities should somehow be allowed to enter the analysis on an equal footing”* (Elgaard, p. 3).

In the dissertation four case stories are described illustrating attempts at a new cross-professional project team arrangement in social work at a local centre (lokalcenter) in Copenhagen. But why can the reading of this be both difficult and inspiring? Well it seems very difficult for a psychologist like I am to come to terms with the idea of considering human as well as non-human entities on an equal footing in the analysis of competence in social work. Before considering this argument in more detail let us take a brief look at the structure of the dissertation and some of the interesting points concerning the use of observations and conversations as methods in the social sciences.

### **Structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation comes in eight chapters. It consists of an Introduction Chapter followed by a methodological Chapter Two **“On the Construction of Facts in Social Science”**, and a Chapter Three and Four on **“Learning Theory”** and **“The Performative Turn in Science and Tech-**

nology Studies”. In the Chapters Five until Seven we follow “Orderings and Spaces in Social Administration”. The Chapter Eight is the Conclusion Chapter.

### **Facts in the making**

As maybe already guessed in terms of methods the author is strongly influenced by actor-network theory and in particular the works of Latour & Woolgar. The author argues that these researchers are “... *presenting their research as an active ordering process rather than a neutral reporting of facts*” (Elgaard, p. 23). This ”school” is mainly developed from ethnographies of the sites where science and/or technology is developed. In Elgaards case, following almost the same vein, a site is studied where not things, but competence is in the making. Throughout the dissertation you are offered detailed descriptions of the seven-month period of fieldwork.

Elgaard used as his main method field observations over the seven-month period of time and did a few formal interviews to get additional information. This is from my point of view an interesting point. Observations played a central role in that not only human verbal reports, but on equal footing the role-played by non-human entities were seen as pivotal in an analysis of competence. The researcher attempts to give a materialistic account of competence. This means that he cannot only rely on descriptions of the experience of competence from the point of view of the social workers. To grasp not just experiences of competence, but a more materialistic perspective on competence he uses his observations of the physical surroundings, the organisational structure, meetings and the daily work involved in the constitution of competence in social work.

From a methodological point of view it is at the same time interesting that the author attributes great value to his numerous conversations with social workers and managers during breaks, where he often just listens and only asks for clarifications. He was obviously considered an interesting conversation partner and these conversations gave him valuable information about what was going on. It is the author’s point of view that it also gave him the opportunity to convey the message that he was not trying to take over the view of one particular party over the other. You could call it the certain kind of “neutrality” on behalf of the social scientist, which I think is not just a result of conversations, but of the researchers ability to

“see” and manage the line in the complex interplay between involvement and distance in relation to the field. But methods like observations, interview and conversations do not stand on their own. Let us consider the analysis on competence resulting from all of these observations, interview and conversations.

### **On competence in social work**

Through the four empirical cases presented; “A discussion about Opening Hours” (case 1), “A Team Training Session” (case 2), “The Working Group” (case 3) and “Working in Geographical Groups” (case 4) we are introduced to the attempts at a cross-professional arrangement of social work involving a private consulting firm, several formal meetings and the continued daily work. The stories are descriptions of meetings involving the social workers, their manager and central staff members or it consists of descriptions of some consultation sessions on the new cross-professional arrangement.

The argument goes that a different kind of space is performed in each of the four cases. For example the author argues: *“The first case, that I analyse, is a brief discussion about opening hours in the local centres. In the course of this discussion several opposing performances are articulated, but the performances remain relatively unrelated and unaffected by each other. This relational pattern might be seen as a case of regional space.”* (Elgaard, p. 91). Space in this respect is not so much the existing physical surroundings, but the kind of space in social work constructed in the discussion of opening hours. At the same time the term performances have a particular meaning. The author argues that *“performances are multiple, emerging and partially interdependent orderings some of which collude, and some of which disarray each other.”* (Elgaard, p. 88).

The performance articulated, in this first case mentioned in the dissertation, concerns first of all the construction of the local centre as “a point in a statistical distribution” concerning opening hours compared to other local centres. It concerns the talk of the local centre as “a user-functional centre” and “as a centre structured by the will of politicians”. It also concerns the talking about social work as “the exercise of professionalism”. This happens when the social workers during meetings are referring to the community of professionals or colleagues. All these kinds of performances are related to each other and performed simultaneously, and

they come to constitute the conception of social work. In all of the four stories mentioned we follow the continual performance of the group of social workers as professional groups versus cross-professionals, as experts versus civil servants. From my point of view this particular focus on the change process involved in the cross-professional arrangement and the term performances may seem something like a paradox, trying, as the author describes it: “*to get a sense of the materialities involved in the development of competence*” (Elgaard, p. 4). Let us consider this paradox.

The focus on the change process involved in the attempt at a cross-professional arrangement may indicate the particular perspective on competence in the thesis. It is not competence as analysed during the daily work involving the work with clients and colleagues, but rather competence as described involved in the particular change process toward a cross-professional arrangement. The intention to study competence from a relational and material perspective in mind this seems like a paradox. During my reading of the dissertation I did wonder if I had a too concrete conception of the non-human entities involved in social work? I thought it had to do with the daily, “dirty” work with the clients and conversations with colleagues? But I was wrong. The focus in the dissertation is on the performance/construction of the possibilities of social work and how different conceptions of social work live life in conflict or in harmony. This is in itself rather interesting, and the author does a very good job analysing the dynamics involved in the change process. But do an analysis of the performances of social work have anything to do with an equal footing of the human and the non-human? For my part I think it rather has to do with an analysis of competence bearing in mind that a focus on the human individual cannot do it alone. That we when talking about being competent as a social worker has to consider the space created for doing this social work. Well this was only to mention some of the interesting problems that the reader began to wonder about.

We must conclude this review saying that the equal footing of the human and the non-human in the dissertation tend to give the reader a hard time. Still I can only recommend a reading of the dissertation. Elgaard opens the question of how to consider the material and non-human aspects of competence. This is certainly a not much investigated and important point concerning the social sciences.