

TO BLEND IN OR STAND OUT?

Hospital Social Workers' Jurisdictional Work in Sweden and Germany

Akademisk avhandling

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Abstract

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This dissertation describes, analyses, and compares the means by which hospital social work associations in Sweden and Germany pursue their members' professionalization through 'jurisdictional work'. The time period covered by the research is 1989 through 2008. The analysis starts from the observation that jurisdictional work represents an ongoing effort by hospital social workers' professional bodies to establish and maintain formalized professional jurisdiction, both internally within the profession and externally vis-à-vis outside stakeholders. The research questions guiding the investigation focus on the kind of activities these professional bodies perform, and the way in which they are performed, to promote hospital social workers' professionalization in the two countries in question. The question will also be asked as to the reasons why hospital social work bodies perform the specific activities under consideration.

This dissertation is a cross-national comparative case study on jurisdictional work performed by a social work subgroup operating in organizational settings where social work represents a minority occupation subordinate to other professional fields. The research materials used for the study include, in the first place, various documents obtained from professional hospital social work bodies in Sweden and Germany. In addition, two focus group interviews with board members of two of the associations studied were conducted.

The theoretical framework used for the analysis and comparison of the empirical data draws on theories of the sociology of professions (Abbott 1988, 2005), complemented by theorizing on compliance in voluntary organizations (Etzioni 1961) and on social identity (Jenkins 2004). Additionally, argumentation analysis is drawn upon Karlson (2012).

The results obtained show there to have been major differences between the jurisdictional work strategies resorted to by the Swedish and German social work bodies. The differences mainly involved the ways in which these organizations supported their members, related to their social work knowledge base, positioned themselves vis-à-vis their trade union, and concretely sought to advance formal protection. The findings point to both internal (i.e., associational, related to the organization's size and resources) and external (national context, specific healthcare setting, and degree of subordination to other occupational categories within the professional context and the specific healthcare setting) factors behind the differences in the studied social work bodies' use of jurisdictional work strategies.

Altogether, two different jurisdictional work strategies were found to be used by professional hospital social worker groups operating in subordination in Sweden and Germany. A *mimetic* strategy was used by the Swedish hospital social workers, to allow them, as a professional group, to better "blend in" with their hospital settings; in this case, similarities between the hospital social workers and their working environment, including other professions present in it, were emphasized, especially as concerns their knowledge base, professional identity, and disciplinary affiliation. In contrast, the German hospital social workers relied on an *aposematic* strategy stressing differences between the social workers' and their hospital co-workers' knowledge base, professional identity, and disciplinary affiliation, so as to make their subprofession "stand out" from its enveloping hospital settings.