

## **SOCIAL POLICY AND SELF-HELP IN DENMARK— A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**KJELD HØGSBRO**

*Department of Sociology and Social Work,  
Aalborg University, Denmark*

### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on how recognition and general acceptance of self-help groups and self-help organisations in Denmark change over time from 1848 up until today. The development between 1960 and 2000 is given a special focus. The article discusses in a Foucauldian perspective the Danish discourse of self-help in relation to welfare policy, professional intervention, social movements, self-help organizations, and applied social research and illuminates how notions about “help” and “adequate support” for citizens are constantly defined and re-defined as part of a cultural process in the Danish context. The article further discusses how Danish welfare policy is influenced by global changes in discourses in a way that demonstrates the international significance of the “Danish case.”

**Key Words:** self-help, Denmark, Foucault, governance, discourse analysis, welfare policy, self-help organizations, governmentality

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article adopts a special focus on the relation between the discourses of welfare policy, professional intervention, social movements, self-help organizations, and applied research with relevance to the Nordic context and specifically Denmark.

First I begin by defining self-help in Denmark and outlining my theoretical approach, before tracing the history of these discourses back to their origin in the period after the first democratic constitution in 1848 and the birth of the idea that people had to organize themselves in mutual aid organizations. In the same period the idea of governing populations in accordance with scientific theories was born, and the article follows the interwoven development of these discourses from their origins and right up until today's focus on effectiveness, evidence, and user involvement. Finally it draws some conclusions from this history as regards our understanding of the internal dynamics of self-help groups and the social context by which they are influenced.

The discourse analysis of this article is mainly based on a review of the contributions from politicians, researchers, and social workers in key positions to the public discussions on social work, social policy, user involvement and self-help in the period from 1970 to 2000, accomplished using the results from qualitative and quantitative research into self-help groups published in the 1990s. Contributions to the discussion have been identified with the help of databases for Danish monographs, journals and newspaper articles published between 1970 and 1990 (Høgsbro, 1992). The database search has been further complimented by later reviews done by Peter Bundesen, Lars Skov Henriksen and Anja Jørgensen (2001), Kaspar Villadsen (2004), and Jacob Torfing (2000). The discourse analysis focuses on the taken for granted premises in these contributions and their references to other key influential discourses and texts.

### **DEFINING "SELF-HELP"**

It could be argued that Self-help is by definition linked to social work (Karlsson, 2002; Høgsbro, 1992). In this article Self-help groups are understood as peer-led and peer-controlled groups for mutual aid with the professionals in the background. Their main function for their members is to help people to cope with the social conditions they share. This state is sometimes connected to loneliness, to a feeling of having no one who really understands their situation, to feeling awkward in public or to a lack of confidence in the advice and information they get from professionals (Høgsbro, 1992). When put together in peer-groups, people experience the common features of individual situations and learn about different ways of coping with these problems. They also share knowledge and information about their rights and opportunities within the welfare system and how to cope with stigma and prejudice in local communities and social networks (Gartner & Riessman, 1984; Humble & Knell, 1989; Katz & Bender, 1976; Nilsen & Talseth, 1995; Pancoast, Parker, & Froland, 1983; Smeby, 1988).

In this way self-help groups and the organisations promoting them assume much of the same function as professional social work, and subsequently there is a certain degree of competition with professional systems of social work (Høgsbro,

1992; Karlsson, 2002; Katz & Bender, 1976). Whether these organisations are solely run by peers or whether they are hybrids of peers and professionals, it is an important empirical issue to ascertain what kind of influence both the professionals and their discourses have within the organisations. As a part of this investigation we have to understand how the existence of powerful social discourses has defined the status and balance of power between professional systems and self-help organisations in different historical periods (Powell, 1994). This article draws on Michel Foucault (1980, 1991) and Mitchell Dean (1999) to help illuminate this process.

### THE FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

According to the Foucauldian perspective, we cannot understand self-help, self-help groups, or self-help organizations as a rational reaction to modern conditions for users of professional services. To find those current orders that the identity of peer groups refers to, we have to dig into the archeology of discourses. We have to find out how and why people with certain problems learned to form peer-groups, the historical roots of this specific idea, how it was accepted within the current discourse order, and how it was transformed into the discourses we find today.

The Foucauldian perspective is a way of seeing social processes as mirrored in and guided by the way we learn to talk about a social situation and a social phenomenon; in other words, the “discourses” that permeate our talking, our writings and our actions. It is a perspective that questions our cognitive ability to act in accordance with one unique and unambiguous rational and even “natural” perception of reality. Instead, this perspective accepts the existence of many “rationalities” often applied in society, suppressing each other or replacing each other in a historical transformation.

In his own research, Michel Foucault was interested in a kind of archeological exploration of the discursive roots of the way we talk about insanity, sexuality, and crime (Foucault, 1980). These three social domains he found exceptionally interesting, because they define the very limits of social acceptance and tolerance. These limits define the very basic order and coherence of society in relation to our ideas about reality, biological reproduction, and individual rights and security (Foucault, 1980).

Later researchers like Norman Fairclough have developed this perspective into a rather well-defined method by which to map a given discourse order. With the help of textual analysis and the identification of references that relate the texts to each other, he uncovers the order of discourses that dominates the way institutions of social service and health care are legitimized in modern society (Fairclough, 2003). He further links the analysis of social discourses to the question of unequal access to power, influence and resources, and this fills out the gap between linguistic discourse analysis and critical social theory (Adorno, 1957; Fairclough, 1995).

The final contribution that supports the Foucauldian perspective of this article was made in 1999 by Mitchell Dean in his book “Governmentality” (Dean, 1999). The governmentality concept, actually taken from an article by Foucault (1991), conceived governance as being linked to a certain mentality in the population that defines aims, limits, and means of governance. As he explains it in his book *Governmentality—Power and Rule in Modern Society*:

The idea of mentalities of government, then, emphasizes the way in which the thought involved in practices of government is collective and relatively taken for granted, i.e. not usually open to questioning by its practitioners. To say that these mentalities are collective is not necessarily to identify them with specific social groups or classes, although it might also be possible to examine the relation between the different mentalities of specific ruling or subordinate groups. It is to say that the way we think about exercising authority draws upon the theories, ideas, philosophies and forms of knowledge that are a part of our social and cultural products. (Dean, 1999, p. 16)

For example, it is not obvious that the state has a basic responsibility to take care of people who are ill or disabled. It is publicly taken for granted in Denmark as a part of our “cultural product.” Furthermore, it is not obvious whether this help has to follow professional guidelines or whether it has to respect the expressed needs of the users and their demand for a certain kind of support. As such, our “Danish” ideas about help and adequate support are concurrently defined and re-defined as a part of our cultural products. The development of these cultural premises sometimes makes reference to discourses produced outside Denmark, while at other times they are rooted in a specifically Danish historical context.

The aim of this article is to present the results of this investigation into the roots of Danish governmentality in a way that both respects the complicated interaction between the different discourses of governance, social work, self-help, and applied social research and at the same time reduces the complexity to some key elements in the discourses that have had a significant function in the development of the general characteristics of the Danish welfare system.

A graphical presentation of the interaction between the relatively autonomous discourses identified in this article could thus be sketched as in Table 1.

The basic idea behind this graphical presentation of the transformation of contemporary discourse orders of governmentality is to capture the interdependence of relatively autonomous discourses. Each column represents a discursive development within a certain domain of the welfare state complex and the rows identify the specific discourse order forming the governmentality of a certain period. The main political discourse about why and how it is necessary to intervene in the reproduction and qualifications of the population (biopolitics) is positioned in the second column. In this respect, the main discourse of biopolitics is the cover term for discourses that define the aims and means of securing coherence and the loyalty of the people as well as the regulation of the size of the

Table 1. The Field of Discourses in the Development of the Danish Welfare System

Year	Main discourse of biopolitics	Subjects of Social Work	State in relation to social movements	Common identity of self-help organizations	Research field and paradigm for applied social science
1848-1930	Security policy	Families	Prevention	Organization of interests	Biological heritage Eugenics
1930-1950	Structural policy	Individuals	Integration	Organization of interests	Social and biological heritage Eugenics
1950-1970	Structural policy	Individuals Social categories	Integration	Organization of interests	Social heritage Social surveys
1970-1980	Structural policy	Social categories Social network and communities	Substitution	Social action Social experiments	Social heritage Social surveys
1980-1990	Cultural policy	Communities Milieus Volunteer organizations	Rehabilitation	Social development Social experiments	Evaluations
1990-2000	Cultural policy	Communities Milieus User-organizations	Collaboration	Social development Institutionalized social action	Empowerment evaluations Social analysis of practical experiences
2000-2010	Public management	Users of public services	Collaboration	Organization of users Promoters of intervention methods	Systematic reviews of effect studies

population, its educational level, organisation, conflict level, internal upheaval, and individual self-governance. The next column shows the transformation in the definition of the target group of social work within contemporary social work discourse and then follows the discourse of the relation between the state and the rising political/social movements. The fifth column shows the discourse within the peer-groups, defining their identity and legitimacy with respect to the benefit from the situation for their members and the last column shows the main discourse of applied social research as regards its most important methodological innovation.

We cannot presume that older discourses die out completely. Generally they retreat to a more marginalised position. They can be found in individual talks and the political programs of smaller groups. Neither do we expect discourses in the same row to be definitely influenced by each other. They can live a rather independent life within their own domain and might as such be subject to a kind of self-protection understood within system theory as autopoiesis (Luhmann, 1984). The whole discourse order that forms current governmentality captures a complex dynamic process. Though it strives toward a certain level of consistency, this order is constantly threatened by major inconsistencies and ambiguities.

### **THE ORIGIN OF SELF-HELP IN DENMARK**

Defined as peer-groups in which life-strategies are developed and spread among people in a shared situation, modern self-help groups can trace their origin back to the beginning of modern democracy in 1848 when people organised themselves to fight for institutional rights such as the right to form labour unions and associations of people with shared conditions and shared political and public goals (Table 1, col. 5) (Skov Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004). The Danish "andelsbevægelse" (cooperative movement) at the end of the 19th century is among the most successful of these organisations. It aimed at ameliorating the harsh conditions on the labour market, the stock market, and the market for everyday requirements (Gundelach, 1988; Hornemann Møller, 1992). Very close to this in its aim and function, we find the first association of people with hearing disability initiated in 1866. This organisation aimed at forming a network which guaranteed its members access to jobs and peers, and the development of sign language as the crucial communicative tool to be understood and met with respect (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen, 2001; Widell, 1988). Furthermore, the liberalisation of the market by legislation in 1856 had wrecked the mutual aid system of the former monopoly enjoyed by the guilds of skilled labourers and paved the way for what Peter Bundesen and Lars Skov Henriksen (2004) call "an impressive growth in voluntary benefit societies for mutual insurance."

Though the constitution of 1848 had made organizational rights and access to basic needs a constitutional right for all citizens, it did no more than stipulate the general idea. The constitution had to be followed by civil actions guaranteeing in practice what the constitution promised in words (Hornemann Møller, 1992).

Other historical events in Danish society might have influenced the political self-esteem of people with disabilities when they organised peer-groups. First of all, the war against the Prussian army in 1864 resulted in a number of young men having the double role both as people with disabilities and as men of honour. Secondly, a new secular paradigm that understood mental and physical disability as being linked to biological genetic predispositions made it possible for every one of these groups of people to claim acceptance and help from society. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century there was a growth in the number of member-based organisations for people with disabilities. In 1925 the first National Association for the Physically Disabled was founded and in 1934 an umbrella organisation for the whole disability field was established (Skov Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004).

In this historical perspective, four separate discourses seem to have been brought together in shaping the identity and strategy of the first self-help groups when they were organised in Denmark in the late 19th century:

1. The democratic idea that governance acquires its form, direction and priorities from the pressure of organised minorities claiming their civil rights.
2. The idea from natural science that disabilities are the result of forces no one can control and from which no one can escape.
3. The new humanistic idea that all people have equal rights when born as citizens.
4. The idea prompted by the war experience that people might have got their disability by serving the nation to the benefit of everyone.

At the end of the 19th century, local governments were offering financial support to associations for mutual insurance and from a governmental point of view this could be seen as a liberal strategy aimed at preventing people from supporting the more revolutionary socialist movements (Villadsen, 2004). When the national organisations for disabled people were founded in the 1930s, at the time when the Social Democratic Party won the election for the first time and took over the governmental position, this could be seen as a general mobilisation of interest organisations supporting the new construction of a modern welfare society that included public support for people in marginalised positions (Skov Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004).

### **CONFLICT BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSES AND USER PERSPECTIVES**

Until the 1970s, there seemed to be no major conflicts between the professional discourses on disability issues and associations organising users with these disabilities. The only case of this kind seems to be the conflict between the professionals and the deaf community which occurred at the beginning of the century and lasted until the 1960s (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen,

2001; Widell, 1988). Although it seems to be the only case, it is nevertheless quite important because the deaf community might be the eldest of these organisations and the first one to insist on strategies based on the experience of its members, rather than being grounded in professional theories of inclusion and exclusion. It is, therefore, worthwhile devoting a few paragraphs to an historical overview of the background to this conflict, which can trace its roots as far back as the early 1800s.

At the beginning of the 19th century, a growing emphasis on the specific causes behind the marginalisation of people with disabilities led to a professional interest in the sign language developed among certain deaf children and adults (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen, 2001; Widell, 1988). In 1807, the first boarding school for deaf children was established on the initiative of a dedicated medical doctor, Peter A. Castberg, who had recently traveled through Europe, studying the educational traditions of teaching means of communication and general educational skills to deaf people. Two opposite strategies were influential at this time: a German tradition of teaching deaf people the use of vocal language to the best of their ability; and a French tradition of developing sign language. Coming home from this journey, Castberg convinced the King and his government that the French tradition was the one to be followed in Denmark, and at the end of the 1880s, this tradition still enjoyed hegemony. The general education of deaf children was primarily adjusted to careers as tailors, carpenters, and dressmakers (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen, 2001).

In 1866, deaf people who had attended this school formed what was probably the first self-help organisation of people with a specific disability in Scandinavia. The organisation, called “Døvstummeforeningen” (The Deaf-mute Association), was financed by its members, and the services it could provide ranged from social activities to access to jobs and health insurance. The members of the association were mostly self-employed people with a disability who just needed minor support to be as fit for education and work as ordinary people. Thus the organisation of deaf people demonstrated the need for a general service system that could help people with disabilities in a way that could compensate for the “handicap” they had in the competition with ordinary citizens on the labour market. In this way the organisation seems to have been an important actor in the development of the first disability rights in Denmark (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen, 2001). The education these deaf people received was conceived as a compensational right that people with fewer resources did not have to pay for, and the compensatory support was given without the loss of citizen rights suffered by ordinary recipients of public benefits at this time (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen, 2001).

Around 1890, the original German strategy gained more and more influence among Danish professionals, philanthropic funds and politicians, and in 1893 a new philanthropic organisation for the vocal training of deaf people was founded. According to the goals of this organisation, deaf people should be trained only by teachers who were not deaf themselves, and deaf people should



be integrated into ordinary schools, churches, unions, and jobs. By the beginning of the 20th century, even at the Royal Danish Deaf Institute originally founded by Castberg, this paradigm dominated the professional approach (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen, 2001).

From this time forth, the organisation of deaf people became totally self-sustained, but left in a partly isolated situation. As such, it kept its original aims of mutual aid and the development of the sign language, fighting for rights and acceptance, and keeping up social activities and networks. The latter elements even seem to have been strengthened in this period (Bundesen, Skov Henriksen, & Jørgensen, 2001).

The difference between the professional understanding of the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion and the understanding of the deaf community is remarkable. Conceived as coping strategies in the way Corbin and Strauss do in their axial analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), this can be outlined as follows:

**Professionals:** Society does not include people who cannot express themselves in ordinary ways. When people are dependent on sign language, they are excluded from everyday social interaction. If they are forced to learn to read people's lips and express themselves vocally, then they will be partly accepted in ordinary day-to-day interaction.

**The deaf community:** Sign language is a language like any other. It can sustain any level of cultural and social reproduction. When properly learned, it will provide the individual with a social network and security. If we insist on using the language and developing our own cultural activities, then we will maintain our self-esteem and be accepted on our own terms.

The disagreement between these two discourses was in fact to last until the general social discourse changed the position and social recognition of minority groups in the 1960s.

Between 1930 and 1970, several associations of people with disabilities were founded, but in these organisations the alliance between professionals and people with disabilities seemed to be more stable and less dominated by conflicts. After the Second World War, the professional medical diagnosis became more and more sophisticated and differentiated into a multitude of diagnostic categories and guidelines for medical and social intervention. As such, the diagnostic categories defined groups of people who deserved special attention, care, and public support from the welfare state. In the wake of these categories and the growing optimism linked to the welfare state programs followed associations of professionals and users who were fighting for their rights, for acceptance and for appropriate public treatment and research (Skov Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004). From a governmental point of view these organisations formed a kind of interest organisations that supported the general development of the welfare system (Table 1, col. 5). In this period, they were mainly based on a professional identification of problems and intervention. The governmentality tended to assimilate these interest groups in a position where the "voice" of the minority groups could be substituted by rational professional decisions (Rold Andersen, 1973).

### THE SELF-HELP MOVEMENT OF THE 1970s

Until the 1970s, the professional strategy still aimed at developing and offering advanced professional help to individuals who suffered from physical, psychological, and social disabilities without listening to people's own experiences. However, at the end of that decade this strategy became subject to critique from several different actors. Among professionals, an increasing emphasis on the importance of support from peers and a critique of the paternalism of professional systems had changed the focus from individual aid and support to a focus on the development of social networks and local communities (Table 1, col. 3). A considerable number of influential Danish social workers, as well as international social researchers, contributed to this transformation of the discourse of social work (Borbye, Jensen, Overgaard, & Rørbech, 1981; Friese, 1984; Hermansen, 1983; Høgsbro, 1992).

Developments internationally formed a backdrop to the situation in Denmark and would appear to have had an influence on events there. The citizen rights movement in the United States in the 1960s, which focused on discrimination, stigma, and isolation of marginalised minorities, seems to have been a considerable influence (Borkman, 1990; Gartner & Riessman, 1984; Høgsbro, 1992; Karlsson, 2002). With a clear reference to this movement, the organisation of deaf people initiated a campaign, named "Deaf Power" aimed at raising the self-esteem of its deaf members (Høgsbro, 1992). "Gay" became a common term for groups of homosexuals with a shared ambition of gaining a public acceptance of this form of sexuality. Activists from the association of people with mental illness and professionals in psychiatry founded a new association of "mad" people in 1979 where professionals were tolerated but expected to take a back seat position (Høgsbro, 1992; Kelstrup, 1983; Skov Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004). The women's liberation movement in the Western World led to peer-groups for women suffering from domestic violence. The AA-movement (Alcoholic Anonymous) was introduced to Denmark, though it was still in conflict with the general paradigm shared by Danish psychologists and practitioners in the field (Høgsbro, 1992). Movies like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Family Life* helped spread the critique of professional systems to a wider public audience. Thus, in the years between 1970 and 1990, self-help organisations developed an experimental practice that challenged the limits of public acceptance and tolerance (Table 1, col. 5). Gradually, this practice was turned into a widely accepted public form as a necessary part of the political system expressing "the user experience" and mobilising resources and self-esteem. When interviewing women's lib movements at the end of the 1980s, the elder members of a women's crisis centre were quite aware of this turn. In the seventies they were regarded as being an almost revolutionary thread to the "establishment"—in the 1980s they were financially supported by a right-wing government (Høgsbro, 1992). In the meantime both the professional discourse and the governmental discourse had changed.

In the wake of this transformation of the professional discourse many new forms of collaboration between organisations of disabled people and the public welfare system were born between 1970 and 1990. As one interesting case, we have the consultants from the organisation of laryngectomised (people who have had their larynx removed and lost their ability to speak in an ordinary way), a peer group organisation without any professional members. The consultants helped public hospitals prepare the patients for this kind of surgery which quite seriously affects identity and social relations. By meeting representatives from the organisation, the patients received visual confirmation that they could have a life afterwards. Furthermore, they were being prepared for the many special issues of everyday life they would be facing, and they learned about specific coping strategies that professionals would never have been able to remember or even understand (Høgsbro, 1992).

The first Danish article mentioning self-help as a supplementary strategy in social work was published in 1983 (Feldmann, 1983). In the years that followed, groups of professionals emphasised the “creation” of self-help groups. These were sometimes professionally initiated, but the professional initiators had to withdraw from the groups after the first couple of meetings and they were only allowed to facilitate the organizational frame and coordinate the initial group process (Bonde Petersen, 1988). In the following years, this kind of professionally initiated self-help groups were generally implemented in the health system in Denmark and other Nordic Countries (Abrahamsen, 1995; Adamsen, Guldager, Gundorph-Malling, & Hertz, 1992; Diemer & Stenbak, 1992; Karlsson, 2002). Thus, “self-help-groups” became the popular common term for users who formed peer-groups for mutual aid, with or without help from professionals (voluntary or paid as staff members). The roots of the professionally initiated self-help come from the tradition for professional “social group work,” and when the professional sometimes stayed as leaders of the groups (urged by the group members) the difference seemed negligible. On the other hand, the term “self-help” indicated a change in the role of the professional discourse. Within these groups the knowledge derived from having genuine experiences from your own life became recognised as being just as important and in certain circumstances more important than a general professional knowledge (Høgsbro, 1992).

The ultimate manifestation of the self-help movement is possibly the movement among “retarded people” around 1990, when these people founded their own national organization outside the organization led by professionals and relatives. A Danish doctoral dissertation from 2010 argues that although some of the cultural and sports events arranged for this group in the 1980s were mostly the products of progressive professionals who invented them and planned and controlled the activities, they also represented a learning process for a new generation of people with mental and cognitive disabilities. In the end, this process led to the formation around 1990 of an organization which was directly controlled by

the members themselves (Bylov, 2010). In passing, it is worth noting that the birth of this organization followed the same pattern as the organization for deaf people had done in the middle of the 19th century, as a peer group formed by pupils from a professionally conducted educational program.

Thus, user organisations and user knowledge had become recognised as an equal and important part of the development of the welfare system in the decade from 1980 to 1990, and from this time onward, the user organisations were represented at all levels of governance ranging from legislation and research to developmental programs and individual rehabilitation plans. On the level of the “everyday life experience” of marginalised groups, novels, poetry, and movies telling the stories of people who had experienced extreme marginalised positions in society became popular.

When asking board members of a majority of user organisations, there now seemed to be a general consensus that the organisations emphasised the change in public attitudes, with the acceptance and perception of the disability, more than individual advocacy (Høgsbro, 1992). The public welfare system was considered to have an obligation to offer individual support, and the support of the user organisations was mostly in the form of assistance when in conflict with public professionals and in helping people out of loneliness and isolation by giving them access to peer-groups (Høgsbro, 1992).

### **THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE SELF-HELP MOVEMENT**

As the emphasis on self-help organisations originated in a variety of fields in the 1980s, it seems crucial to apply discourse analysis to identify the genealogy of the social discourses that made this situation possible. The following two relatively independent changes in the social discourses of the 1970s already mentioned above seem to have contributed to the situation.

First of all, grassroots movements occur among minorities with a focus on discrimination and stigmatisation. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States questions the whole idea of normalisation and the ambition of getting people with disabilities to live a “normal” life and the tendency to ignore or repress deviancy and cultural diversity (Høgsbro, 1992; Karlsson, 2002). Instead of being simple interest groups within the established welfare system, fighting for better support and benefits for its members, the movement among the minorities began to fight for acceptance and respect—for the right to be different.

Second, a change in the professional discourse of social work emphasised the individual context of clients and recipients of welfare benefits (Table 1, col. 3). The new trend focused on milieus and social relations as being the important context for understanding social problems, and accordingly social work had to

mobilise the resources provided by networks, families, and local communities. This discourse drew attention to agents outside the professional domain and gave birth to the idea that the collective “empowerment” of networks, families, and communities could solve social problems which could never be solved professionally.

Furthermore, the expanding welfare research of the 1970s produced empirical evidence showing that even in the most prosperous years of the post-war period a growing number of people with disabilities were excluded from the labour market (Friis, 1981). True enough, physical health had improved with the increased access to modern comforts such as toilets and baths, television, health services, transport, and healthy environments. Nevertheless, differences in income, education, and working conditions were just as great as they had always been, and loneliness, depression, psychological strain, and other indicators of individual exclusion and isolation showed an increase (Hansen, 1978; Holt, 1979). Within social research, researchers were now talking about “*new and old* welfare goods,” emphasising the idea that something had been lost during the modernization process. This was quite a challenge to the governmentality of the 1960s. In this decade politicians, as well as researchers and social workers, had believed that expertise and rational governance could overcome social gaps, poverty, and poor living conditions. This had been the main premises for the Kennedy administration and the later “War on poverty” programme in the United States, as well as the Danish policy of the Social Democrats and leading social scientists (Albæk, 1988; Burawoy, 2005).

These three independent social processes, the grassroots movements among minority groups focusing on “stigma,” the professional focus on milieus and communities and the results of social research seem to explain the changes in the basic construction of the welfare system that took place in the 1980s. They undermined the self-consciousness of politicians and professionals supporting the idea that public welfare solutions could be based rationally on a top-down implementation of a welfare state system based on advanced professional intervention and results from social research. As such, the changes in the social discourses sustained not only the development of the modern version of self-help but also paved the way for a neo-liberal turn in political philosophy (Dean, 1999). According to this turn, the professional welfare services and the professional conception of people’s problems could have the unintended effect of further stigmatisation and marginalisation. This discourse that originally seems to stem from conservative debates in United States now began to permeate political discussions, professional discussions among social workers, and the critique of social work from critical sociologists (Høgsbro, Pruijt, Pokrovsky, & Tsobanoglou, 2009; Murray, 1984; Prince, 2001; Rose, 2000).

### THE RELATED DEVELOPMENT OF APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH

From 1950 to 1970, applied social science (Table 1, col. 6) followed its own ambition of becoming an integrated partner in the post-war construction of the modern welfare system (Lazarsfeld & Reitz, 1975). Its prime resource was the invention of mathematical statistical theory in the 1930s, which allowed researchers to identify the conditions of huge populations by investigating the conditions of rather small samples (Lazarsfeld & Reitz, 1975). This made the whole of society transparent as regards the social conditions of even rather small segments of the population, and thus it became possible to investigate the effects of social programs and political innovations. Hence applied social research was able to take over the arena for “biopolitics” when biology failed (Dean, 1999). Before The Second World War, biological explanation had been the main reference for discourses explaining the social conditions of poor people, social deviancy and even the difference between developed and under-developed cultures and countries. However, when bio-politics became eugenics and further developed into the catastrophe of the German “endlosung,” the biological explanations became seriously compromised, and this might explain why applied sociological research attained a more influential position in the post-war development of the welfare state project.

At the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s, sociological explanations based on large quantitative surveys became the basic rational argument for innovations in the Danish welfare system (Hansen, 1978; Rold Andersen, 1970). At the same time, however, a growing number of critical sociologists criticised the applied social research for contributing to a top-down governance without questioning the basic goals and rationale of this development (Burawoy, 2005; Høgsbro, 1992; Høgsbro et al., 2009; Lazarsfeld & Reitz, 1975). An expanding interest in understanding the origin and diversity of social values and cultural phenomena in modern societies led to a greater emphasis on qualitative social research and ethnography (Burawoy, 2005; Campbell, 1978; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Furthermore, when politicians began to question what could be called the “top-down professionalization strategy,” it diminished the tendency to make political decisions on the basis of a professional judgment of the conditions of the population as they emerged in the results of quantitative social surveys. In the 1970s the Social Democratic government had financed a tremendous national survey of the social situation of different categories of people and the results of the surveys had questioned the efficiency of structural policies aimed at securing equity and the quality of life (Hansen, 1978). In the 1980s a planned follow-up survey was cancelled. When biopolitics aimed at initiating processes which involved citizens actively in local decisions and development, formative evaluations, empowerment evaluations, and action research became more adequate tools in applied social research, because these methods were able to support

decentralised social processes that represented a unique combination of locally realistic means aimed at locally articulated goals (Albæk, 1988; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Pawson, 2003).

### **THE GOVERNMENTALITY OF DANISH WELFARE POLICY**

Looking at the development of the Danish welfare system from its birth in the 19th century, it seems obvious that discourses that developed quite independently within their own domain of society (grassroots movements, professional social work, social research) influenced each other and led to a global transformation of governmentality. Moreover, from the beginning they were included in a wider field of discourses dominated by biopolitical discourses about how the national state could strengthen its position on the international scene by governing its citizens (Table 1, col. 2). When social policy began to emerge in Western society, to begin with it was understood as a tool in the security policy of the state. It was conceived as being able to make an important contribution to security policy by ensuring that poor people did not support revolutionary movements that could weaken the strength of the state and the coherence of society (Hornemann Møller, 1992). If a state could not prevent internal upheaval and conflict, it could not perform a sufficient threat in international negotiations. In the 1930s, the paradigm changed slightly to a focus on industrial strength and the ability to build a sustainable infra-structure of education, mass-consumption, and integration. In this way the discourse of governance changed from a focus on security policy to structural policy. As the above review has shown, we are facing discourses in the 1980s, which deny the importance of structural factors and promote the idea that exclusion and loss of coherence in society stems from segments of poverty culture characterised by its dependence of welfare benefits (Murray, 1984; Prince, 2001). Political strategies now start to focus on community development, empowerment, and cultural integration of minority groups. Deviancy and exclusion are seen as cultural problems that challenge the welfare system. Under the influence of globalisation and the rising public expenditures on structural policy (education, health programs, and social benefits), emphasis is put on the cultural conditions for national integration and international competition at the expanding global market. Briefly, this development in biopolitics could be characterised as a development from security policy to structural policy to cultural policy (Dean, 1999; Høgsbro, 1992).

The next interesting question to address is of course: what could be said about the development from 2000 until today? Somewhere around the end of the 1990s (Table 1, row 8), a growing emphasis on effectiveness and evidence-based public service seems to shape a political ambition of achieving simple premises for allocating public resources commonly known as “New Public Management”

(Ekeland, 2005; Pearson, 2007; Simons, 2004; Webb, 2001). This could be interpreted as a move away from cultural policy to a kind of governance which focuses solely on making the welfare provisions more efficient. It is a kind of governance where the whole discussion about values and goals disappears and is replaced by a management approach focusing only on effectiveness in the global competition between different models for public services (Dean, 1999, pp. 165-173). This would restrict the relation between users and politicians to an alliance with the sole aim of getting better service for less money.

According to this point of view, the self-help organisation is once again turned into an interest organisation but with a much more active role in the promotion of certain concepts for intervention in the problems. Organisations among people with mental illness and families with developmental disturbances are now sometimes formed with the direct aim of promoting a certain method (Recovery, medicine-free hospitals, Applied Behaviour Analysis, Minnesota etc.), and the user-groups are generally seen as being allied partners of a neo-liberal government in controlling and claiming optimal effect and quality of professional services. Within this governmentality, people with disability are understood as critical “users” choosing between different professional models using the Internet and the systematic reviews as their main sources of information about the effectiveness of different interventions.

This means that the special competence of “self-help groups” in identifying problems and adequate solutions is no longer regarded as the important contribution to the development of the welfare system. The development and delivery of welfare services is regarded once again as a professional matter. The judgement of effectiveness and quality is regarded as a scientific issue. Users and politicians are jointly charged with controlling this unified system of accreditation and evaluation.

The self-help aspect and even the use of the term has disappeared from the public discourse in Denmark, as intervention in the life-situation of people with social problems is now primarily seen as being professionally developed, controlled by evidence and chosen by sovereign users with an ability to know what kind of support they needed. When the term “self-help” is occasionally used, it does not refer to a critical activity in opposition to professional discourses but to a kind of social technology—a way of learning how to help yourself. As such, “self-help groups” sometimes even become synonymous with psycho-educative methods within medicine and psychiatry. This is the case even when the user contribution to the education proves meager and the substance of the “learning process” seems totally dominated by the top-down reception of medical professional paradigms. In this way “self-help” is being turned into a well defined “method” that can be subject to cost-effectiveness evaluations and judged by its contribution to the reduction of an expanding public welfare system (Powell, 1994).



## CONCLUSIONS

From a governmentality perspective, self-help movements among people categorized by society as “clients,” “patients,” or “users” mirrors contemporary hegemonic discourses defining what can be governed, how we govern, how we are governed and how we govern ourselves (Dean, 1999). These contemporary discourses permeate the identity of the organizations and their members as a political culture. That is not to say we should deny the importance of contributions from other researchers dealing with internal dynamics between volunteers, users and professionals (Abrahamsen, 1995; Høgsbro, 1995), distribution of different forms of self-help activities (Karlsson, 2002; Mehlbye & Christoffersen, 1992; Rappana Olsen, 1993), or their psychological function (Diemer & Stenbak, 1992; Feldmann, 1983; Karlsson, 2002; Stang, 2009). These are all important issues when we address the question of how and why these self-help activities become a part of advanced public welfare systems. Yet an objection can be made in that these internal dynamics cannot be fully understood without mapping the external discursive field they refer to, explicitly or implicitly, when they develop these internal frames of reference, identity, paradigms, and praxis.

The development of the discourse order ought not to be understood as the implementation of a single hegemonic discourse implemented by society as an unambiguous process, but as a complex decentralized process where relatively autonomous discourses influence each other and make possible the transformation of the whole discourse order (Dean, 1999). The deconstruction of such links and references, for example, in the case study of the deaf-organization shows how changes in professional paradigms influence the internal dynamics and identity of self-help groups as well as their political influence in contemporary society.

On the other hand, the self-help organizations also seem to be quite influential in the transformation process of the discourse order. They strive to define the problems on their own terms using the experiences of members, and when reaching a certain level of agreement with the professional perception of the same issues, contribute to the development and legitimacy of public services. Some authors seem to ignore this active contribution to the welfare system (Torfing, 2000; Villadsen, 2004).

As indicated earlier, Danish self-help organizations were born in the last half of the 19th century as interest organizations like unions, primarily taking care of the interests of their members with respect to access to education, work, housing, and public services. The strategy and aims of these organizations were founded in contemporary professional discourses that defined and categorised both problems and adequate solutions. The professional discourse was maintained and communicated by dedicated voluntary professionals within the organizations. As such, they often had the role of spokespersons on behalf of people who suffered from certain disabilities or social discrimination. The unity of professional experts and peer-groups within the same organizations expanded their

influence, and in the post-war period, this unity both contributed to and gained support for the widely accepted idea that the welfare system could be founded solemnly on rational solutions to the benefit of all citizens.

This state of affairs remained unchanged until the 1970s, when professional discourses were subject to critique, with the emphasis on stigma and exclusion being sustained by professional categories and definitions. From this time onward the self-help movement focused on alternative human resources, diversity, and the right to be different and to be accepted as having equal rights and equal access to participation. Politically, this turn was supported by the discourse of the civil rights movement in the United States, and a weakened belief in rational planning. On the one hand, this paved the way for the influence of user organizations and on the other, it contributed to a general neoconservative critique of the welfare system for being inhuman and stigmatizing poor groups as being without personal resources. Following this turn in governmentality came a period when the problems and challenges in modern society were seen as cultural rather than structural issues. Decentralized developmental programs with locally defined goals and means based on user involvement became the new way of developing the Danish welfare system.

When New Public Management became the hegemonic frame of reference for governance, developmental programs became much more top-down defined as the systematic development and evaluation of well-specified methods. To gain a position within this new governmentality, organizations of people in a marginalized position were conceived as organizations of users emphasizing critical evaluations of professional interventions.

The self-help groups of the 1970s and the 1980s were not aimed at internalizing professional paradigms; on the contrary, they generated and sustained sub-cultural perceptions grounded in the experiences of the users. They were not aimed at reducing public expenditures but at increasing social inclusion, diversity and acceptance. But then again, this was not the general case before 1970 (with the deaf organization as a unique exception). Before 1970 the user organizations seemed to be influenced by the vision of a rational and fair distribution of welfare based on progressive social and biological science, a vision they shared with all other strong political actors influenced by the current governmentality of the post-war period. As Mitchell Dean puts it in the quotation at the beginning of this article: *“The way we think about exercising authority draws upon the theories, ideas, philosophies and forms of knowledge that are a part of our social and cultural products.”*

The point is that individuals do not have an instinctive correct perception of their own situation. Neither do organizations. They try to understand their own situation and the conditions they share with peers by referring to accepted discourses in society. These discourses might be sub-culturally sustained in opposition to professional paradigms or they might be professionally accepted and fit into the current hegemonic governmentality in any given historical period.

As such, “self-organized self-help” represents no more than a *possibility* for the birth of alternative discourses that might challenge professional paradigms and be more in accordance with users’ everyday experience. A realistic judgment of this possibility will acknowledge that these sub-cultural paradigms will only permeate the professional system in periods where these systems are in themselves “permeable”; that is to say, when their internal consistency and coherence are weak and subject to ambiguities. Whether this is the case (as it was in Denmark in the 1970s) depends on global historical as well as local cultural premises which are, as Mitchell Dean (1999) puts it, “a part of our social and cultural products.”

Today we *might* face the end of a period dominated by an extremely centralized form of public management where all actors are supposed to contribute to cost-effective solutions to any kind of social problems. This *might* lead to a rehabilitation of self-help groups understood as peer-groups following their own values, promoting locally defined goals and focusing mainly on life quality, acceptance, and belonging. On the other hand, however, this depends on the development of the economic crisis and the epistemologies of political movements that might gain a hegemonic position in the wake of the current global challenges.

The kind of archeology that lies behind this article includes a deconstruction of the welfare system which dissolves into the discursive activities of different actors in certain historical periods. As an empirical investigation, this kind of archaeology is a never-ending story. Discourse analysis is a collective investigation where ever greater details will be found to enlighten our understanding of the origin of ideas that form the governmentality of a given period. The result of this investigation, the reconstructed story, as it has been presented in this article, is a kind of “thick description” whose story-line seems to be in accordance with the details we have identified (Geertz, 1973). Although we have tried to seriously take into account the status and influence of all significant contributions to the political as well as theoretical discussions, this is not the final story. It is a story to be built upon whenever we discover new sources and new cases that reveal details and aspects we have not yet been able to consider.

## REFERENCES

- Abrahamsen, K. S. (1995). *Felles Skjebne—Felles Løft*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Adamsen, L., Guldager, E., Gundorph-Malling, B., & Hertz, E. (1992). *Selvhjælpsgrupper for Mennesker Med Livstruende Sygdomme*. København: UCSF/Akademisk Forlag.
- Adorno, T. W. (1957). Sociologie Und Empirische Sozialforschung. *Frankfurter Beiträge Zur Soziologie Bd. 4* (p. 112). Frankfurt/M: Exkurse.
- Albæk, E. (1988). Fra Sandhed til Information—Evalueringsforskning i USA —Før og Nu. Akademisk Forlag.
- Bonde Petersen, L. (1988). *Kan Vi Støtte Hinanden*. København: Krogh Forlag.
- Borbye M., Jensen B.S., Overgaard C., & Rørbech M. (1981). *Sociale Netværk—Set som Teori og som Ressourcer i Praktisk Socialt Arbejde* København: Kommiteen for Sundhedsoplysning.

- Borkman, T. (1990). Experiential, professional and lay frames of reference. In T. J. Powell (Ed.), *Working with self-help*. Silver Spring: NASW Press.
- Bundesen, P., Skov Henriksen, L., & Jørgensen, A. (2001). *Filantropi, Selvhjælp og Interesseorganisering. Frivillige Organisationer i Dansk Socialpolitik 1849-1990 erne*. Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag.
- Burawoy, M. (2005). For public sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 70, 4-28.
- Bylov, F. (2010). Den Store Løsladelse—En Kulturhistorisk Beretning om Empowerment-Bevægelserne Blandt Udviklingshæmmede 1980-95. København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetshøjskole.
- Campbell, D. (1978). Qualitative knowing in action research. In P. Brenner & M. Brenner (Eds.), *The social contexts of method*. London: Croom Helm.
- Dean, M. (1999). *Governmentality—Power and rule in modern society*. London: Sage.
- Diemer, A., & Stenbak, E. (1992). *Selvhjælpsgrupper—Om Seks Projekter i Danske Lokalområder*. København: UCSF/Akademisk Forlag.
- Ekeland, T.-J. (2005). Kvalitetssikring eller Instrumentalistisk Fejlgreb. *Social Kritik*, 17(102), 34-47.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis—The critical study of language*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse—Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.
- Feldmann, W. (1983). *Forældregrupper, Selvhjælpsgrupper, Samtalegrupper*. København: Munksgaard.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge—Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. Great Britain: Harvester Press Ltd.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller Harvester (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. London: Harvester.
- Friese, P. (1984). *Miljøarbejde i Lokalsamfundet*. Kommiteen for Sundhedsoplysning.
- Friis, H. (1981). *Nederst ved Bordet*. København: Socialforskningsinstituttet.
- Gartner, A., & Riessman, F. (Ed.). (1984). *The selfhelp revolution*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures—Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Gundelach, P. (1988). *Sociale Bevægelser og Samfundscændringer*. Århus: Forlaget Politica.
- Hansen, E. J. (1978). *Fordelingen Af Levekårene*. København: Socialforskningsinstituttet.
- Hermansen, O. F. (Ed.). (1983). *Socialt Arbejde i de Lokale Fællesskaber*. København: Munksgaard.
- Høgsbro, K. (1992). *Sociale Problemer og Selvorganiseret Selvhjælp*. København: Samfundslitteratur.
- Høgsbro, K. (1995). Professionalismen og de Frivillige i det Sociale Arbejde. In K. Klaudi Klausen & P. Selle (Eds.), *Frivillig Organisering i Norden*. Otta: TANO.
- Høgsbro, K. (1996). Fra Socialteknologi til Udviklingsprogrammer—Udviklingen i den Sociologiske Sektorforskning i 80erne. In L. Hansson & K. Aagaard Nielsen (Eds.), *Sociologiens Historie*. København: Forlaget Sociologi.
- Høgsbro, K., Pruijt, H., Pokrovsky, N., & Tsobanoglou, G. (2009). Sociological practice and the sociotechnics of governance. In A. Denis & D. K. Fishman (Eds.), *The*

- new ISA handbook of contemporary sociology—Conflict, competition, cooperation.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage/ISA.
- Holt, P. (1979). *Fordelingen Af Arbejdsvilkår og Sundhedsforhold for Lønmodtagere.* København: Lavindkomstkommisionens Sekretariat.
- Hornemann Møller, I. (1992). *Den Danske Velfærdsstats Tilblivelse.* København: Samfundslitteratur.
- Humble, S., & Knell, J. (Ed.). (1989). *Self-help in health and social welfare—England and West-Germany.* London: Routledge.
- Karlsson, M. (2002). *Självi Men Inte Ensam—Om Självhjälpsgrupper i Sverige.* Stockholms Universitet.
- Katz, A. H., & Bender, E. (1976). *The strength in US: Selfhelp groups in the modern world.* New York: New Viewpoints.
- Kelstrup, A. (1983). *Galskab, Psykiatri, Galebevægelse—en skitse af galskabens og psykiatriens historie.* København: Galebevægelsen.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Reitz, J. G. (1975). *An introduction to applied sociology.* Oxford: Elsevier.
- Luhmann, N. (1984). *Soziale Systeme. Grundriss Einer Allgemeinen Theorie.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Mehlbye, J., & Christoffersen, M. N. (1992). *Selvhjælpsgrupper—Omfang, Karakter Og Erfaringer.* København: AKF-Forlaget.
- Murray, C. (1984). *Losing ground: American social policy 1950-1980.* New York: Basic Books.
- Nilsen, S., & Talseth, S. (1995). *Selvhjælp På Norsk.* Oslo: NotaBene.
- Pancoast, D. L., Parker, P., & Froland, C. (1983). *Rediscovering self-help—Its role in social care.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pawson, R. (2003). Nothing as practical as a good theory. *Evaluation, 9*(4), 471-490.
- Pearson, M. (2007). Systematic reviews in social policy: To go forward, do we first need to look back? *Evidens & Policy, 3*(4), 505-526.
- Powell, T. J. (1994). Self-help research and policy issues. In T. J. Powell (Eds.), *Understanding the self-help organisation—Framework and findings.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Prince, M. (2001). How social is social policy? Fiscal and market discourse in North American welfare states. *Social Policy and Administration, 35*(1), 2-13.
- Rappana Olsen, B. C. (1993). *Den Vet Best Hvor Skoen Trykker.* Oslo: NKSH.
- Rold Andersen, B. (1970). *Socialreformundersøgelserne.* København: Teknisk Forlag.
- Rold Andersen, B. (1973). *Grundprincipper i Socialpolitikken.* Albertslund: Social-politisk Forening.
- Rose, N. (2000). Government and control. *British Journal of Criminology, 40,* 321-339.
- Simons, H. (2004). Utilizing evaluation evidence to enhance professional practice. *Evaluation, 10*(4), 410-429.
- Skov Henriksen, L., & Bundesen, P. (2004). The moving frontier in Denmark: Voluntary-state relationships since 1850. *Journal of Social Policy, 33*(4), 605-625.
- Smeby, J. C. (1988). *Selvhjælpsorganisering i Socialektoren.* Oslo: Institut for Socialforskning.
- Stang, I. (2009). *Being in the same boat: An empowerment intervention in breast cancer self-help groups.* Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research—Grounded theory procedures and techniques.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Torring, J. (2000). Velfærdsstatens ideologisering. In T. B. Dyrberg, A. Dreyer Hansen, & J. Torring (Eds.), *Diskursteorien på arbejde*. Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Villadsen, K. (2004). *Det sociale arbejdes genealogi—om kampen for at gøre fattige og udstødte mennesker til frie mennesker*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Webb, S. A. (2001). Some considerations on the validity of evidence-based practice in social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, 57-79.
- Widell, J. (1988). *Den Danske Døvekultur*. København: Danske Døves Landsforbund.

Direct reprint requests to:

Kjeld Høgsbro  
Department of Sociology and Social Work  
Aalborg University  
Kroghstræde 7  
DK-9220 Aalborg Ø  
e-mail: kjeldh@socsci.aau.dk