

Abstract

Researchers have attended to matters of space and environment of social work practices in both social work- and diaconal studies. This thesis builds on and contributes new insights to these bodies of knowledge by exploring spatial aspects of outreach work in urban spaces. The study builds on fieldwork with an NGO located in a larger city in the south of Norway. The fieldwork consists of interviews with social workers and participatory observation at two social work initiatives. The empirical material also includes interviews with security guards, as the study explores social workers relation to other actors in urban space.

The main disciplinary belonging of this thesis is diaconal studies. In addition to contributing empirical knowledge concerning care practices, this thesis also discusses approaches to knowledge production in diaconia more generally. In doing so, the overall question that this thesis addresses the following: *What kind of knowledge does an abductive analysis of care practices in outreach social work, drawing on concepts of space and work knowledge, contribute to diaconal studies?*

The abductive approach in this thesis combines perspectives and concepts from two theoretical frameworks: Institutional ethnography (IE) (Smith, 1990; 2005) and Henri Lefebvre's (1991) *The Production of Space* (POS). Both these theoretical frameworks share an interest in empirical discovery of how people's experiences and practices are socially produced. IE is a mode of inquiry that builds on particular ontological and epistemological understandings. In this study, IE is an approach useful in exploring how social workers' practices are institutionally organised, where their (embodied) knowledge about their everyday work is a point of entry. The first article 'Exploring the Potential of Institutional Ethnography in Diaconal Research' introduces some understandings and concepts central to IE, and draws on these perspectives to discuss diaconal empirical knowledge production. As diaconal studies are often concerned with issues of marginalisation, the relevance of IE is discussed in relation to the analytical resources and how IE understands how power operates. Moreover, the thesis draws on IE perspectives in challenging normative and theoretical understandings of diaconal practices and research.

Lefebvre's POS contributes with theory on space, insisting on understanding and making visible the significance of *where* social workers' practices take place. Thus, the analytical work in this thesis builds on considerations of various aspects of care practices – both spatial

and institutional dimensions. The following two articles in the thesis contribute empirical knowledge concerning such spatial aspects. The article ‘Producing spaces of care in public urban places: Discovering relations between social workers’ work knowledge and social spaces’, contribute new insights on processes involved in discretion-based judgements. The study finds that the environment in which social worker’s work shapes their decision-making regarding how to provide care. The findings make visible skills, knowledge and experiences significant for the kind of care that takes place. At the same time, social workers are also transforming the environment through their care practices, thereby producing ‘spaces of care’. Social workers also shape urban spaces in their relation to security guards. The third article ‘Care and order in urban spaces: social workers and security guards’, explores social workers’ interaction with security guards and how they respond to issues of marginalisation. The work of social workers is organised around doing care while security guards promote order and security. However, the study finds that security guards also participate in care practices. Moreover, the study finds that social workers and security guards reproduce and oppose ruling in complex ways, such as market forces. Attending to both spatial and institutional aspects of practices makes visible different aspects that constitute practices.

In diaconal studies, research on space is oriented towards developing theoretical understandings of practices and experiences. This thesis has challenged the current limitation in scope. Drawing on concepts from IE and POS has directed research interests towards an *empirical discovery* of spatial aspects that constitute care practices. The abductive approach in this study has involved creative processes where theoretical understandings and empirical material are central to developing insights about care practices. This thesis thus pushes diaconal studies in new directions, by showing some of the complexities and particularities of care practices, at the intersection between theoretical understandings and empirical discovery.