

# Self-Regulation as characteristic for the Methodology of Social Work

## *Summary of a thesis*

This is a very general summary of the thesis of Gerard Donkers, doctor in the psychological, pedagogical and sociological science. In this summary all sorts of interesting details and practical elaboration have been left out on purpose. On account of the necessary level of abstraction the summary doesn't do justice to the liveliness of the underlying material.

## **Introduction**

In this thesis a search is made for a content based framework for reflection about the methodology of social work. 'Content based' refers to a linkage between a central goal orientation of social work and an analysis of the problem situation of its clients. From these two perspectives is looked at the programmatic-relational performance of the professional. Such a content oriented approach towards methodology equals a critical position both with regards to a programmatic reduction and to a normative reduction of methodological action.

The choice was made for promotion of the self-regulatory capacity of clients' as the key goal orientation of social work. Confrontation of the clients with their self-regulating ability after all seems to be a core aspect of its methodology. Emphasis is put on the right of self-determination of the clients and on helping the clients to help themselves. In the transition to the twenty-first century, this theme of self-regulation surely has lost nothing of its value and relevance. The ability of self-regulation is seen as een core aspect of sustainability.

## **Case studies**

So the objective of the study is to design a framework for reflection that can be useful for testing and legitimising the actions of social workers. To realise this objective a start was made with case studies in the context of a collaborative project between field practitioners and the department of social work of 's Hertogenbosch University. First of all a number of case studies from different fields of social work were carried

out, independent of one another. Next in the research project a cross case analysis was done. By *case* is meant: a worker-client combination. The unit of analysis is not the single client, but the complexity of interaction between a social worker as part of a professional service system, and a client as part of a client system, jointly active in a social service project during a specific period of time. While collecting, coding and analysing the data use was made of the 'Grounded Theory Approach' of Glaser and Strauss. Using this research method a contribution has been made to the development of a theory of methodology based on the concrete practice of social work. The procedure covers four phases: exploration, specification, reduction, and integration.

In the *exploration* phase eighteen people - social workers, teachers and students - interviewed a number of social workers and their clients after a short interview training in the use of in-depth interviews. A list of open and broadly formulated questions was used. With the help of this questionnaire they dealt with a number of formal themes that were in one way or another relevant to the problem studied in the project. The intention was to chart each and every case situation as completely as possible. From this entire operation four fully-fledged case studies resulted, stemming from the fields of: general social work, youth services, industrial social work, and medical social work. After collection of the data each separate case was first of all discussed in an analytical session with external experts and judged according to the degree of success and degree of satisfaction with the social worker's work-method. After this session the researcher analysed the case. He subdivided the case into 'scenes' and attributed a code to each scene in the form of a task. A *task* was defined as:

*a series of interrelated actions of those involved, oriented towards a certain goal, in a specific context of action.*

While allocating the tasks the researcher tried to be as economical as possible. Every task of each underlying process had to meet the requirements of sensitivity, consistency with the data, workability, and relevance. After having coded the entire text sentence by sentence, the

researcher drafted a memorandum for each remaining task, and subsequently added all the scenes founded. The result of this analysis was submitted for judgement to a platform of experts in the field of development of methodology. For each case the platform had a different composition. De Groot's *Forum Theory* was applied as meticulously as possible. At last a final report was made of each case. After four of such case studies the decision was made to terminate the exploration phase. It could reasonably be stated that a certain degree of saturation of the twenty-five detected tasks had occurred.

In the subsequent *phase of specification* of the study the field-related tasks were elaborated as precisely as possible to the level of sub-tasks and dimensions. An entirely new questionnaire was constructed around the twenty-five tasks which were found. Four new cases were then selected: from general social work, budget assistance, assistance to foreign clients, and assistance to addicted people. After the data collection exercise how the above tasks could cover these new materials was examined as well. Next the twelve content based tasks were worked out and arranged in sub-tasks by means of a cross-case analysis per task. In order to do this, firstly an ordered inventory of the problems in all eight case situations was made. Derived from the kind of problems detected, the provisional sub-tasks were indicated. Next an inventory was made per detected sub-task of the working methods of the eight social workers and elaborated into *tactics* in the nature of:

*If the worker seeks to follow a specific norm, then he had better act in such or such a situation (according to the people concerned) in this or that way.*

Sub-tasks were also formulated as a combination of problems, goals and working-methods. As a last step the sub-tasks were scrutinised for aspects or dimensions occurring in them in relation to the problems, the content-based goals, and the kinds of working methods in the eight cases. The result of this process of specification was the gradual emerging of a specific reflection model that became visible out of the caseload. Out of practical and content-based considerations it was decided to stop the research procedure. From the questions that

emerged from the cases it had become obvious by now that we could move to a systematic theoretical exploration of the several meanings of the concept of 'self-regulation' (see chapter two).

Various types of detailed account were made of each single step in the survey. In that way the qualitative research was made as reliable as possible. Especially the work with the forums of external experts produced a good control on the reliability of the analysis. Apart from that a number of precautions was taken during the gathering, coding and analysing of the data to monitor the internal validity of the research. Reference can be made for example to the instructions for interviewing. Yet, the statement of the problem of this research project and the questions arising from the unquestionable, undoubtedly produce a certain bias of the data. For instance we can point at the phenomenon of *proto-professionalism*. With regards to the external validity it is not possible to statistically generalise to other situations and persons in the broad field of social work the model of reflection that is developed. We merely have aimed at the possibility of analytical and theoretical generalisation. The intention was to arrive at a suitable content-based framework for reflection about the methodology of social work, based on the data of the eight cases.

### **A theoretical survey of 'self-regulation'**

As a skeleton for the elaboration of the different meanings of the concept of 'self-regulation' in the various theories of action, a classification of three agologic<sup>1</sup> change models is used: the social-technological model, the person-oriented model, and the society-critical model. These models represent three different ways of looking at the practice of changing in social work.

In the social-technological model the concept of 'self-regulation' is dealt with in the cognitive approach of behaviour, the systems theories, the social casework approach, and the task oriented social assistance.

In the person-oriented model are discussed: social-constructural

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<sup>1</sup> 'Agologic' does not exist in English language. The from Greek derived 'agodic' is used for 'leading on how to act' (compare with 'pedagogic'). Agology is therefore to mean: 'the theory of what to do and how to act in order to realise a reference value of behavior' or 'the theory of social *changing*'. In Dutch the words 'agogisch', 'agogiek' and 'agologie' exist in common professional language.

thinking, inter-actionistic approach, client-centred approach, biodynamic viewpoint, and Theme Centred Interaction.

In the society-critical model the concept of 'self-regulation' is elaborated as it appears in dialectical psychology, the experience based learning theory of Negt and Kluge, the theory of communicative action of Habermass, the gender specific approach, the political approach and the empowerment approach of social work.

From this survey of literature it appears that self-regulation has something to do with goal and value oriented action by individuals and by social systems (collective self-regulation.) In the social-technological model it appears primarily as a formal concept of independent self-direction and processing of information, as a result of which specific context bound contents and objectives get less attention. In the two other models the emphasis is more on self-regulation as a concept that is dependent both on subject matter and on the person. Furthermore it becomes clear that self-regulation can be conceived as norm oriented or value oriented action of people vis-à-vis themselves and their environment. These actions contain three fundamental dimensions: the cognitive, the affective, and the behavioural. After all self-regulation is not considered a mechanic process determined by the environment. The emphasis is on the active consciousness of people. However, this active consciousness appears in the social-technological model in most instances as a form of active response to the input of information from the environment. In the latter model the search is more for 'objectified' knowledge of systematic repetitions or scientific law. In the person-oriented model self-regulation is seen more as a matter of conscious action, starting from oneself as subject, and thus as an expression of someone's real autonomy. In the society-critical model 'self-regulation' enters the picture (amongst others) as a dialectic process between subject and object.

### **A possible reflection model for the methodology of social work**

In chapters three to seven of the study a number of different meanings of the theoretical concept of 'self-regulation' have been discussed in relation to the underlying themes or essential tasks emerging from the

research. In this 'shuttle traffic' between theory and practice a possible *reflection model* for the methodology of social work became visible. In this model *self-regulation* has been defined as:

*a conscious and unconscious form of context-dependent action, oriented towards the realisation of one's own values and goals, in as far as this action is 'adequately' fine-tuned to internal and external relationships and structures.*

In this definition three basic dimensions of self-regulation become visible as three inter-twining axes:

- I. cognitive self-direction
- II. internal fine-tuning between parts of the self, and
- III. external fine-tuning between the self and the environment.

#### *I. Cognitive self-direction*

Key to cognitive self-direction is the field of tension between goal-oriented cognition, and goal-realising behaviour of the actor. 'Self-direction' is defined here as: a form of goal-oriented action in which people themselves decide, - relatively independent of their environment -, which goals or values they wish to realise in their behaviour. During the elaboration of dimension it will appear that not all manifestations of self-direction can be considered to be self-regulation. 'Self-regulation' comprises of only those forms of self-direction, that are adequately adapted to internal and external relations and structures. In other words: self-regulation always means the realisation of more than one goal at the same time. In the effort to realise one objective, more goals that relate to matters of internal and external feed-back must be kept in mind.

In cognitive self-direction of behaviour four central tasks emerge in a certain cohesion.

#### *A1. Becoming aware of goal orientation in actions*

Often clients do not choose consciously for a specific goal direction, and at the same time are not aware of the goal direction or reference value that are implied in their behaviour. In itself this is no problem and it can even be desirable. But the automated non-reflective pilot can let people

down in special situations, e.g. if these are complex or new. In such situations social workers help their clients to become aware of their own behavioural standards, to reconsider these standards if the need arises, and to eventually set themselves new values or goals. A combination of two operational methods seems to be typical here. In the first the operational method has been described as *seduction to self-direction*. With this methodology the worker takes into account the right of self-determination of the client. The second approach is more directive and confronting. This method of working guarantees the internal and external adequacy of the chosen goal-direction.

#### *A2. Observing and explaining the functioning as a person*

Both for the development and testing of goal-directions in actions, and for the realisation of a certain goal-direction, the question is important to which factors in a person a behavioural situation is attributed. For example it is possible that one doesn't focus one's attention sufficiently on the private self at moments that this is actually needed. Or one is not sufficiently attentive to the self-in-relationships.

#### *A3. To estimate the influence of the environment in relation to one's own influence*

Also the assessment of the reciprocal process of influence between the individual and the environment is of essential importance for social work. For the development and testing of goal-directions and for the realisation of a goal-direction that is chosen, it is important to question to what one attributes the behavioural situation: to the internal or external variable or constant factors? A characteristic of social work becomes visible here: thinking in terms of connections, and paying attention to the 'wholeness of a person'.

#### *A4. Realising the goal-direction*

Goal-oriented action is not only cognitive activity. It also comprises the actual behaviour by which one tries to effectuate a desired goal (reference-value.) It concerns effect-oriented activity before, during or after a certain action.

### *II. Internal fine-tuning between parts of the self*

Separation and re-connection of the parts of the self are presented as the second basic dimension of the concept of 'self-regulation'. These deal with the 'regulation of the internal relationships', or: the balancing people occupy themselves with just to keep their affections, opinions and doings in balance in all kinds of situations. In order to make such an internal fine-tuning possible it is, first of all, important that the client is in contact with the various aspects of the self. Next, attention is drawn to possible discrepancies between cognition and emotion, between experience (the inside) and behaviour (the outside,) and between social roles and the person. While recognizing of the separate specific characteristics and roles of an individual a link has been made to the capacity of people to enter into contact with themselves and with others as a 'whole person' without denial of the single parts of themselves. Both a degree of separation and of re-connection between elements of a person are needed to become more 'oneself' in contact with others. At last it is important that one can 'let go of' oneself, so that ultimately the parts can together arrange for the fine-tuning themselves. These matters equally concern the social worker. In the process of internal calibration four central tasks of the social worker appear to be relevant in a given context.

*B5. Experiencing feelings and needs*

Development of internal fine-tuning first of all requires that one can allow oneself to relate to one's own feelings and needs.

*B6. Fine-tuning of opinions and behaviour to feelings and needs*

Discrepancies between opinions and affections, or between the inner world of experience and the external world of behaviour, can be obstacles for the social functioning of clients. Awareness of these discrepancies and attempts to resolve them can be important for the feeling of personal identity.

*B7. Adaptation of role-functioning to feelings and needs*

For the promotion of internal fine-tuning a satisfying functioning in social roles is important too. To be able to be oneself in a certain social role it is necessary that on the one hand one makes a certain separation between role-functioning and the rest of the person, and on the other



hand one ascertains a certain linkage between function and person. A person's social identity develops out of this process of role-separation and role-linkage.

*B8. A certain degree of authentic and spontaneous behaviour*

Social workers do not perceive all goal-oriented action as desirable. Considered from the inner world of experience of people it merely concerns goal-directed behaviour that correlates with their own inner needs and motivations, that has an authentic nature, and that is based on a positive self-perception and a feeling of self-dignified value.

*III. External fine-tuning between the self and the environment*

Self-regulation is seen as 'dialogic' goal-oriented action, directed towards the realisation of *coherence of life*. This coherence of life contains more than experiencing the internal coherence between parts of the self. A role is also played by external fine-tuning to the societal environment. Here we can use the term 'regulation of external relationships'. A *dialogic style* of collaboration, with space for goal-directed influencing of values, persons and positions, emerges in the methodology of social workers. The workers apply such a style to the relationship with their clients as well. On the one hand they emphasise everybody's personal integrity and everyone's functional role or position and by doing so recognize the potential conflicting nature of the co-operation. On the other hand they advocate a person-involved bound relationship with their clients. They are seeking a balance between distance and emotional involvement. They see themselves more as coaches and facilitators than as bosses and controllers.

*C9. Mutual adaptation of value-conceptions*

The starting point of working is that individuals set themselves values and goals (both me- and we- oriented value conceptions) and try to realise these in the context of the environment. Curtailing this right of self-direction by way of coercion, pressure or domination, in principle disturbs the process of self-regulation. From the study it appears that a certain degree of coercion and pressure can only be justified if and in as far as it promotes the self-direction of the client. The point of departure of the self-direction implies that people get in touch with one another as

individuals setting values, and these value-conceptions must accordingly be mutually attuned to one another. Social workers contribute to this from a *multiple partial positioning* in the interest of the client.

#### *C10. Interpersonal action*

Contacts between people exist of more than one process of exchange of values and opinions. People meet one another as a 'complete, whole person'. Social workers contribute to an interpersonal tuning by helping people to better attune each other's actions and reactions, by promoting - within certain limitations - the freedom of action of the partners, by emphasising the equity of people and groups, and by attempting to realise relationships in which there exists a certain equilibrium between emotional involvement and the distance that is required for the development of everyone's integrity or autonomy.

#### *C11. Influencing positions*

Self-regulation presupposes and promotes also an equitable material and immaterial position in the network of relationships between people. Endeavours are made to attain a certain power or influence in order to realise their own value conceptions and interests. Possibly this is done in collective association with like-minded others.

#### *C12. A certain degree of independency of the environment*

Social workers do not perceive all goal-oriented action as desirable. Considered from the external relationships of the individual and the environment it is a combination of dependent and independent behaviour, as well as a certain degree of non-conformist behaviour that nevertheless is communicative.

### **Reflection on the reflection model**

This model of reflection, with its three underlying basic dimensions, offers both a classification schedule for problems in the day-to-day social activity of clients, and a content-based framework for reflection on the actions of social workers. The model can be a tool for learning based on concrete case situations, in lectures, supervision, inter-vision and workshops. It can be applied to both short-term and long-lasting

situations of social assistance. The model is probably suitable too for social work with groups of collectives. We then arrive at the concept of *collective self-regulation*. It can be observed that the three mentioned basic dimensions of self-regulation mentioned can, in any case, also be recognised at this level of theory and practice. Specifically the potential field of tension between individual and collective self-regulation appears to be an important point of attention.

Self-regulation is primarily intended as a concept by which the goal-oriented activity of clients and social workers is described. From this description results a model with two important *normative points of departure*. On the one hand the formal right of self-direction for the individual. This starting point implies a non-paternalistic, non-moralistic and positive style of approach that by its nature is dynamic and communicative. On the other hand it implies a subject matter based orientation to the coherence of life; i.e. the process of internal and external fine-tuning. This only concerns the goal-oriented action in as far as it is adequately attuned to internal and external relationships and structures. Apart from 'self-direction' other important norms for action like *letting go oneself* and *working environment directed* come forward. It is crucial for social work that 'self-regulation' in this sense is defined as a content-based contextual concept of reflection, a 'self-direction-in-relationships-and-structures', even though the concept becomes more vague and complex with this broad definition.

Two narrowly interrelated characteristics of the mode of action are *unpredictability* and *dependency of context*. Realising objectives is not a matter of a linear goal -> means event, nor of a nomologic<sup>2</sup> process, guided by rules and prescriptions in the form of a process that beforehand has been structured and phased, but it concerns context-oriented behaviour that in its essence is flexible by nature. Always space must be allowed for the making of choices based on new experience. Which does not mean that self-regulation is a process that is steered only by the consciousness of people. Social workers and clients continuously refer in an implicit or an explicit way to all kinds of manifestations of objective 'self regulating' physical, unconscious,

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<sup>2</sup> 'Nomologic' refers here to the Greek 'nomos' = law. 'According to the law of rules on law' How things must be.

personal and societal structures that are not directed by a conscious subject. In their views the self-regulation of a subject has to be *realistic*, which means to be adequately attuned to the internal and external relationships and structures. Ontologically seen self-regulation, therefore, seems to be defined by necessity as a *combination* of subjective and objective self-regulatory processes, that in the behaviour of people relate to each other in a dialectic way. People are only able to direct themselves adequately, if they base their actions on the supposition that a 'real' reality exists 'independent' of their consciousness, to which they can refer in their consciousness. Proceeding from context-dependence therefore implies a way of 'realistic' thinking that can be seen as characteristic for social work. 'The goal-oriented activity of the subject needs to be attuned to the internal and external object-reality to which the behaviour refers', proclaims the pragmatist in an almost trivial statement.

Self-regulation, as elaborated in the combination of the three dimensions, can be considered pre-eminently as a concept of social changing, because it focuses attention on the dynamics of changing or influencing social situations. A plea emerges for a critical agogical praxis, that is to say: for bringing together in one model the opposing positions that need one another to make the tableau more complete, without resolving the struggle between the antipodes or contradictions in favour of some kind of a 'integrative model'. Departing from the diversity of features and models mutual coherence and adaptation have been looked for, but each and every interrelation ultimately remains open-ended and unfinished, because the opposing positions continue to be recognised as points of separation.