Linda Lane
Michael Wallengren-Lynch *Editors*

Narratives of Social Work Practice and Education in Sweden

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Foreword

I am delighted to have been asked to write a few words to introduce this timely and important book. The authors rightly identified a gap in my own book, *Becoming a Social Worker: Global Narratives*, 2013. The stories that appeared in this book (and in its predecessor, *Becoming a Social Worker*, 2003) were largely the stories of the people I had met over the course of my career in social work, as a practitioner and an academic. So this was definitely not a random sample! There were no Swedish stories in the books, which makes this new volume all the more welcome.

What *did* emerge in both books, and (I have no doubt) will be found in this *new* book, were amazing stories of human beings who, against all the odds, made a decision to try to make a difference in their lives. People of all genders, sexualities and colours, young and old, disabled and non-disabled, from privileged and non-privileged backgrounds, all felt that they wanted to do something to help others and make society a fairer and better place for all. Social workers are not, of course, the only people who work in 'helping professions': doctors and nurses, teachers and youth workers, psychologists and therapists all choose to work for the greater benefit of all. What makes it harder for social workers, however, is that most people do not *choose* to have social work involvement in their lives. On the contrary, they accept it either because the state mandates that they do so, or because they have run out of all other alternatives. They are quite literally, at the end of their tether. We might see this as social work's curse; it certainly explains why social work has been called an 'unloved' profession. And yet, looked at differently, perhaps it is, at the same time, what makes social work *special* – specially demanding and specially rewarding at the same time. There is, without question, nothing more satisfying than walking alongside someone who is going through a process of personal transformation, whether this is a young person we are encouraging to move away from a life of crime or an older person who now has to accept that they can no longer live independently. Becoming and being a social worker is, at the end of the day, an enormous privilege; we are really lucky to be able to do what we do.

Of all the books I have published over the years, *Becoming a Social Worker* remains the one that sold most copies. This matters little to me, because editors do not earn vast amounts of money for their hard work! What *does* matter to me is that

the stories touched readers, who could identify themselves in the very different accounts that people gave of their journeys in and through social work. Those who read the book were considering embarking on a career in social work, or who were at the start of their training, got courage from the stories of others. They began to give value to their own experience and appreciate a shared value-base alongside other social workers. This is not to suggest that there is only one way of being or doing social work; quite the opposite, it is about acknowledging the breadth and diversity of approaches and people within social work. So if you are at the beginning of your social work journey, I would like to wish you well, and hope that social work brings you the same joy (and of course, at times, despair) that it has brought to me over the years. I remain proud to be a social worker; I hope you will be too!

Viviene Cree
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About the Contributors

Kristina Alstam   PhD in Social Work, is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her research interest revolves around discourses of family and parenting, social class, and the redistribution of resources. Of special interest is the manner in which ideologically connoted discourses of welfare regimes and austerity are circulated, defended and contested within the domain of social work. Among her resent publications is her doctoral thesis, *Parents, Power, Poverty: On choice and responsibility on two parental communities* (2016).

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Tobias Davidsson   PhD in Social Work, is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Originally, a social worker working with family treatment, his main research areas are social exclusion and control, the political management of poverty and labour market policies. Among his latest publications is a joint article with Frida Petersson titled *Towards an actor-oriented approach to social exclusion: a critical review of contemporary exclusion research in a Swedish social work context* (2018).

Björn Gustafsson   PhD, is emeritus Professor of Economics at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and research fellow at the Institute of Labor (IZA), Bonn, Germany. His research focus is the distribution of income, poverty and the situation of international migrants in Sweden. Since the 1990s, he has taken part in the Chinese Household Income Project (CHIP) and studied

earnings, income, poverty and ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China. A recent publication with Torun Österberg is *How are immigrant children in Sweden faring? Mean income, affluence and poverty since the 1980s* (2018).

Ing-Marie Johansson PhD in Social Work, is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She has many years' experience in International Social Work both in teaching and in developing academic courses in frameworks such as Nordplus, Erasmus, Linnaeus-Palme and the Swedish Institute. Among her latest publications is *The unruly young men: Exploring some key constructions of masculinity within Swedish social services* (2016) with Helena Johansson.

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Michael Wallengren-Lynch DSW in Social Work, University of Sussex, United Kingdom. He practiced social work from 2004 to 2015 and is now a researcher and lecturer at the University of Malmö, Sweden. His current research interests focus on school-based social work, disaster social work, internationalisation and social work education. His latest publication with colleagues Anna R, Bengtsson and Katarina Hollertz is *Applying a 'signature pedagogy' in the teaching of critical social work theory and practice* (2019).

Rehema Prick BA in Social Work and Licensed Systemic Family Psychotherapist (Retired), worked as a social work professional from 1991 until her retirement in 2018. During her years in the field, her work focused on immigrants, refugee youth and their families. After many years of work in refugee centres and as a high school counsellor, she ended her career as a family therapist. She remains committed to gender empowerment for immigrant women through her engagement in voluntary organisations.

Somita Sabeti BA in Social Work, earned her MA in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's programme *Crossing the Mediterranean – towards investment and integration (MIM)*, a programme that focused on European co-operation with North Africa and the MENA region within the migration and diversity field, jointly offered by four universities in Italy, Spain, Tunisia and France. Her research interests include migration studies, integration, inclusion and diversity practices as well as liminality and belonging. She published her master thesis *Between Liminality and Belonging – mapping the experiences of Afghan young adults 'in transit' in Istanbul* in 2019.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Linda Lane (iD) **and Michael Wallengren-Lynch** (iD)

Social work is a helping profession. With its focus on social justice, the profession attracts many people who have a burning desire to help others. While a desire to *do good* is often enough to help people get involved in social work, it is seldom enough to keep them in the profession. Working with societies' most vulnerable populations is challenging and often fragmented work requiring formal education and skill to advocate for clients while remaining cognisant of legal frameworks and the scarcity of resources. Consequently, while their desire to *do good* survives, social workers are often filled with doubt. This usually arises during social work education, when students' dreams of *doing good* are confronted by the structured pedagogy of social work education, and if not then, it most certainly does in those first years of being a newly qualified social worker trying to find a place in the profession. With time, most learn how to adapt and find ways to navigate the profession without giving up their dream. However, learning to live with limitations can be frustrating and painful, and it is in these situations that we need a hand to hold – someone we can turn to for support and inspiration.

This book is inspired by our observations of a growing interest in social work as a profession during a period when the challenges facing social workers in the performance of their jobs has increased.

Driven by new policy directions, cost-cutting and limited resources, these challenges have resulted in a need to explore and discuss how social work is performed and what the future holds for the profession. The book is focused on the challenges of performing social work as well as the responses that can be used to enhance and celebrate the value of commitment to the profession.

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When writing this book, we looked to Vivienne Cree for inspiration and guidance, first with curiosity and then with passion. Her book *Becoming a Social Worker Global Narratives* (2nd ed. 2013) tells the stories of people's journeys from around the world living with and working in social work. Using personal narratives, Cree presents each author's start, what they learned along the way, how working in the profession shaped their view of life and their motivations for staying in the profession. Cree's book invited us to engage with their narratives and experience how the desire to help others can be tiring, frustrating and never-ending but also rewarding. Through these narratives, we learned that there is no exact formula for finding your place in social work and, importantly, we noticed that the Nordic region was under-represented in the book.

The welfare states of the Nordic countries, with their particular brand of welfare state provision based on principles of equity and inclusiveness, provide illustrative examples of the relationship between an ideology of universal welfare, the provision of welfare services and the role of social work. Sweden in particular has been seen as the model to emulate in terms of the provision of social welfare, but few have understood how its services are organised or the historical link between social work and social policy. Furthermore, while it has retained a degree of universalism, since the mid-1990s, the support of Swedish policymakers has shifted from traditional state-provided universal services towards market-based ones. With economic efficiency a high priority, policymakers are concerned about satisfying demand at the lowest possible cost. Often referred to as new public management (NPM), the shift in focus has resulted in changes in the organisation and management of public services. In Sweden, these include the deregulation of state-controlled markets and the privatisation and decentralisation of public services, all of which are designed to increase competition, user choice, individual agency, customer satisfaction and economic efficiency.

Trapped between the ideals of traditional welfare service provision and NPM-inspired market-based provision, Swedish social work practitioners and educators must adapt to the new national policy structure. In this process social work professionals are confronted by intertwined and conflicting problems, the complexity of which is creating major challenges and testing the ability of Swedish social work practice and education to cope. Thus, one aim of the book is to contextualise social work practice with regard to the current changes affecting Swedish society and by extension social work itself.

The narratives in this book contribute new knowledge on social work practice and education in two important ways. First, with their focus on Sweden, they contribute to our understanding of the Nordic context and fill the gap left by Cree. Second, they provide insights from the perspective of social work practitioners and educators of social work in a welfare state under the pressure of NPM. In keeping with the spirit of Cree's book, we present the many faces of Swedish social work education and social work practice, how it has evolved and how it affects the profes-

sionals who practise it. The book is personal, reflective and purposive, and considers the journeys of its contributors to various ways of understanding, addressing and resolving social problems with a focus on the Swedish context.

Adopting Cree's narrative approach, our aim is to enrich social work literature by presenting authentic narratives of various pathways to social work and give insight into the complexity and rewards of engaging in professional social work practice and education.

Sweden's transition to a multicultural society with greater ethnic diversity is represented in this book by the narratives of first- and second-generation migrants alongside native citizens. Since the 1970s, migration to Sweden can be attributed to two major factors both of which are integral to the Swedish welfare state ideology. The first is a commitment to social justice and human rights, which has led Sweden to accept a large number of refugees from war-torn areas and the second, as a condition of its membership of the European Union. As a member since 1995, Sweden is committed to the free movement of people between member states, allowing citizens of other countries to migrate to Sweden. Together, the authors of the book show different ways of engaging in social work education and practice. Their collective experiences span global practice and education, some solely in their home countries and others across multiple cultural contexts. Each contributor's journey is interwoven with a variety of theoretical perspectives and frameworks from different disciplinary fields. What the narratives have in common is that they address and explore social work from the perspective of professional practitioners and educators whose practical knowledge, experiences and reflections on professional development and social work are shared.

This book is intended for novice and advanced students of social work, as well as those considering a career in the field. It can be used as part of graduate introductory courses or at the undergraduate level, as well as in practice- and policy-oriented courses. The book is also suitable for students in or preparing for work placements. Educators may read this book to prepare students and offer educational resources in the best way to help their students. We hope that the narratives presented here will provide insight into the settings and opportunities facing students and help guide them through the uncertainties and challenges of social change. We include social work practitioners in our presumed audience because they too are educators and serve as a link between education and practice.

As we have already noted, social work education and practice take place within a particular historical, social, political and economic context. To set the stage for the narratives, this chapter will continue by providing an overview of the Swedish context. We trace the development of the Swedish welfare state from its historical and ideological beginnings to its current incarnation and set it in dialogue with the development of social work education and practice. The chapter concludes with an introduction to the book's chapters.

1.1   The Swedish Welfare State

Sweden has an international reputation for being a specific kind of welfare state. Through its history of social democracy, it is associated with the 'Scandinavian' model of high taxation and high welfare standards (Esping-Anderson 1990). In this tradition, principles of equity and inclusiveness contribute to a culture of solidarity. Emerging as the result of agreements, coalitions and cooperation between the dominant Social Democratic Party (SAP) and other liberal political parties, trade unions and employer organisations, and grounded in liberal principles of equality and universalism, the Swedish welfare state was designed to eradicate poverty and unemployment through taxation, wealth redistribution and wage and labour market policies that secure the welfare of Swedish citizens (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1993; Lundberg and Åmark 2001). Characterised by values of social justice and solidarity, the term *Folkhemmet*, meaning 'the people's home', became synonymous with efforts by the first Social Democratic Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson, to illustrate that in the Swedish welfare state no citizen would be left out or made to feel unwelcome due to class or gender.

Although its roots are in the 1920s, it was not until after World War II that the Swedish welfare state first took on the characteristics that we recognise today (Lindert 2004). The cornerstones of the Swedish model were implemented during this period. All employed citizens were insured against lack of income in case of sickness, old age or unemployment by means of tax-financed programmes, alongside which a universal means-tested social security net was provided for those who could not work including children, the elderly and persons with disabilities (Esping-Andersen and Korpi 1987).

The focus on universal support for all citizens regardless of economic or social status is an important characteristic of the Swedish welfare state model, which unlike other models, for example those in the United States or the United Kingdom, tends to focus on low means-tested benefits for the most vulnerable citizens.

The emergence, and much of the success, of the Swedish model, can be attributed to the Social Democratic Party (SAP) remaining in power either in a majority government or a coalition with centre liberal parties until the mid-1990s when it was replaced by a centre-right government (Lindert 2004; Esping-Anderssen 1993). The Social Democrats returned to power in 1995 but were replaced in 2006 by a new right-wing coalition. This party was re-elected in 2010 and formed a minority government. Not surprisingly therefore, social policy in Sweden can be seen as having experienced periods of stability, the first dominated by policies of social justice and equality and the latter, as we discuss in the following text, marked by increasing individualism and the introduction of market-oriented welfares services and organisational accountability.

In the 1970s, insurance coverage was extended to include parental insurance. By removing the focus from women as primary caregivers and introducing caregiving as a right for men, Sweden earned the title of the 'gender-equal, women-friendly welfare state'. Through these policy changes, designed to enable economic independence and combine family life and working life through paid parental leave and public care for children and the elderly, Sweden confirmed its intentions to achieve gender equality (Lane et al. 2011; Björnberg 2002; Hernes 1987).

Several other reforms were constitutive of the Swedish desire to achieve gender equality and social justice. These included educational reforms introduced to provide free education for all children. The right to education was expanded in the 1960s and 1970s to include adult education, training and vocational education, and university-level education was expanded to include a greater number of students through the establishment of new universities and colleges together with an affordable student loan system that opened the door to higher education for previously excluded groups. To meet the need for more housing, driven by internal migration, extensive housing programmes were introduced in major cities such as Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmoe. The infrastructural changes in housing, communications and education implemented in this period prepared Sweden to meet the demands of a growing industrial sector to produce goods and services for export markets (Blomqvist 2004). All the mentioned reforms contributed to supplying the country with healthy, well-educated citizens, whose contribution through taxes and engagement in the labour market remained the primary source of finance for the continued expansion of the Swedish welfare state and welfare services.

Globalisation and dependence on trade and external markets have drawn Sweden into increasing interdependency with the rest of the world. The first major challenge to the Swedish welfare state arose during the 1970's oil crisis. As a small export-dependent country with strictly regulated capital and finance markets, the oil crisis was the first test of the country's ability to maintain high levels of social insurance and social services. In addition, as noted previously, Sweden had generous migration policies in response to the demand for labour and human rights of refugees. From the 1970s and progressively in the 1980s, these external challenges increasingly underpinned shifts in government policy and rhetoric. Added to this, Swedish citizens had begun criticising the cost of administrating the large public sector economy and its myriad of welfare programmes and services. As economic problems mounted in the 1980s, discussions about political ideology started to challenge the traditional Swedish welfare model (Oscarsson 2000). Public debate raised questions as to whether citizens were receiving good value for their taxes. The task for the Swedish government was to design and implement the policies needed to adjust and transform the economy to meet the demands of globalisation while responding to criticisms of the inefficiency of the public sector by the citizens.

Between 1986 and 1990, in an attempt to increase efficiency by moving decision-making on social services closer to citizens, the Social Democratic government increased the discretionary power of municipal governments by decentralising control of and deregulating Swedish social services. The decentralisation resulted in a system in which each municipality has the authority and responsibility to determine how welfare services are organised and resources distributed. The Social Democrats opened the door to limited privatisation within the public sector, a trend that continued with the election of a Conservative government in 1990. When the Social Democrats regained power in 1994, they continued the policy drift towards market-based social services initiated by the previous government in the belief that this would reduce costs and increase users' satisfaction. These changes in direction and intensity are often loosely referred to as neoliberal or, specifically in terms of the organisation and governing of public services, NPM (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).