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ANALYSIS OF GENERATIVE MECHANISMS

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Abstract. The focus of this article is the analysis of generative mechanisms, a basic concept and phenomenon within the metatheoretical perspective of critical realism. It is emphasized that research questions and methods, as well as the knowledge it is possible to attain, depend on the basic view – ontologically and epistemologically – regarding the phenomenon under scrutiny. A generative mechanism is described as a trans-empirical but real existing entity, explaining why observable events occur. Mechanisms are mostly possible to grasp only indirectly by analytical work (theory-building), based however on empirical observations. In order to achieve such an explanatory analysis, five methodological steps are suggested

1 This paper is a revised English-language version of Blom and Morén 2009. We would like to thank Studentlitteratur for permission to publish an English-language version and two anonymous JCR referees for comments that helped us to improve the paper.

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and discussed, among them abduction and retroduction. These steps are illustrated throughout by examples drawn from empirical research regarding social work practice. The article is concluded with a discussion of the need for knowledge of generative mechanisms.

*Key words:* abduction; explanation; generative mechanisms; retroduction; social work

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that research methods are chosen in direct relation to the phenomenon under study and the research questions that are posed. Consequently, within the social sciences we experience a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, sometimes in combination with each other. However, the research questions that it is possible to pose and the possible knowledge that can be gained are also dependent on the basic view – ontologically and epistemologically – regarding the phenomenon under scrutiny. Simplifying somewhat, we can say that an empirical realist view tends to entail quantitative methods and knowledge of empirical correlations, whereas a constructivist/hermeneutic view tends to entail qualitative methods and a knowledge of meanings and generally agreed concepts. In contrast, we apply the metatheoretical perspective *critical realism* in this article. Critical realism entails the use of certain research methods, but it also emphasizes the importance of *methodology*, i.e. the connection and interdependence between metatheoretical considerations and the choice of research methods. In addition, it necessitates the analysis of *generative mechanisms*.

With regard to our own field within the social sciences, which is research in social work, it is reasonable to ask: In what way do results in social work practice, i.e. the effects on clients’ lives, arise from the content of interventions and the contextual contingencies? This kind of question involves two aspects of research: firstly, empirical descriptions and an investigation of the content of interventions, the contextual contingencies as well as the outcomes; and secondly, an *analytical explanatory ambition* that involves a question concerning the interdependence of the two aspects. This latter aspect is a matter of causality, which in turn – depending on ontological and epistemological views – might be investigated in different ways. With an understanding of the subject under study, i.e. the chain context-interventions-results in social work practice, solely as an empirical phenomenon, it is reasonable to pose questions on empirical correlations and by way of different statisti-

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4 See Archer et al., eds, 1998; Bhaskar 1989.
cal methods infer conclusions on probable cause-effect relationships. This type of research is mainstream and builds mainly on quantitative methods. However, from the perspective of critical realism, this social phenomenon should instead be viewed as consisting of (constituted by) several levels of reality, and causality must be found on levels beneath the empirical and the observable. This kind of basic view on the phenomenon makes it possible to pose different research questions, in our case questions concerning generative mechanisms in social work practice.

Research on generative mechanisms is very rare within the field of social work,\(^5\) which makes it a challenge to search out and develop suitable research methods. In this article we discuss the significance of generative mechanisms and account for the different steps and methodological considerations that are necessary for their analysis. The different steps are illustrated by empirical examples. The article is structured in three sections:

- What are generative mechanisms in social work practice?
- How can mechanisms be identified, described and conceptualized?
- Who needs knowledge about mechanisms?

2. What are Generative Mechanisms in Social Work Practice?

As mentioned above, our approach to social reality is based on critical realism, which builds on an articulated ontology, i.e. a particular view of how reality is constituted. Briefly stated, Roy Bhaskar distinguishes between three overlapping ontological domains: the empirical, the actual and the real.\(^6\) The domain of the empirical consists of what we experience, directly or indirectly. This domain is distinct from the domain of the actual where events happen whether we experience them or not, because what happens in the world is not the same as that which is observed. This domain is, in turn, different from the domain of the real, where we also find the mechanisms that can produce events in the world. Critical realism also emphasizes that the working of these mechanisms is contextually contingent. By means of analytical work and the gradual building of theory that is firmly based on their manifestation empirically in events, it is possible to gain knowledge of underlying generative mechanisms (in the domain of the real) and conceptualize them. As a basis for the considerations on methods in the next section – and as an important part of the methodology – we first account for our view of the basic concept ‘generative mechanisms’.

\(^5\) For an overview see Morén and Blom 2007.

Critical realism changes the focus from events that can be empirically observed to generative mechanisms. Hypotheses about generative mechanisms are based in part on empirical observations, but we can only draw conclusions about them by analytical means. Consequently, we will discuss methods to gain *empirical-analytical knowledge* later in the article. An example from the field of social work goes as follows. Suppose that a client under certain circumstances is able to change her way of living as a consequence of social worker interventions. The events as such – the client’s and the social worker’s mutual efforts as well as the changes involved – can be directly observed and documented (in the domains of the empirical and the actual). However, the generative mechanisms that explain how and why the events happened are only accessible indirectly by developing theory in relation to those mechanisms. Clearly, the mechanisms are not less real for not being directly observable, but exist (in the domain of the real) whether we conceptualize them or not. Accordingly, this type of explanatory knowledge demands a theoretical language that penetrates the empirical surface and forges contact with the reality that exists beneath the level of events.

Consequently, generative mechanisms actually exist in the social world, but they are to be regarded as potential or *tendential*. This implies that they are not always realized in empirical, observable events. In order to make this happen, auspicious conditions are necessary; in other words, mechanisms are contextually conditioned. Therefore, we have to imagine that different mechanisms can counteract each other; they can be active, but at a certain moment and under certain contextual circumstances counteractions can entail that observable effects do not take place. In a conventional empirical correlation study, such an observation would probably lead to the conclusion that the studied intervention does not have any effect; there is no correlation. However, according to critical realism, it is possible to draw conclusions about how existing mechanisms under certain circumstances can prevent effects from emerging.

The mechanism concept is well established, for example within technology and the natural sciences. However, within the social sciences it is less so, and especially within the area of social work. Subsequently, we need to clarify our view of the mechanism concept and its relevance for social work. In the following we discuss *social mechanisms* at three levels: micro, meso and macro. As will be seen, structure in relation to mechanisms is considered to be both constitutive and – as an aspect of social interaction – a means of mediation.

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7 Mahoney 2001 presents an overview of 24 different definitions of mechanisms found in research literature. See also Groff, ed., 2008 and 2009; Hartwig 2007; and Pinkstone and Hartwig 2007.
8 The account of generative mechanisms given here draws on Blom and Morén 2010.
Mechanism = powers + micro-social interaction and structure. The mechanism consists of powers in terms of causes, motives, considerations, choices, and social interaction at an individual level (dyads or smaller groups). At the basis is intentionality (a human fundamental power) that is the driving force behind motives, considerations and choices. Intentionality can, in turn, be affected by previous causes and the circumstances that condition human opportunities to choose. The powers (causes, motives, considerations and choices) are mediated and work by means of micro social interaction (oral, written and/or sign language, gestures, sound, symbols, bodily contact etc.), but also by way of social and material structures (e.g., role expectations related to gender, ethnicity, religion, hierarchical position; and communication technology such as email or mobile phones) that are simultaneously a part of the mechanism = micro social mechanisms.

The above can, in principle, be exemplified by describing the course of events in a game of chess. Player A moves a piece (an event that for player B becomes a cause), which ‘compels’ player B to think (consider) how the next move will be made. Player B really wants to win this game (motive) and decides (chooses) to push forward a stronger piece (an event that becomes a cause for player A), and so forth. Thus, a chain of causes, motives, considerations, choices and interactions constitutes the mechanism.

Mechanism = powers + meso social interaction and structure. The mechanism consists of powers in terms of causes, motives, considerations, choices and collective social actions at group and organizational levels. The powers are mediated and work by way of meso social interaction (social interplay within and between groups, networks and organizations), but also via social and material structures (e.g., routines, bodies of regulation, documents, symbols and artefacts) = meso social mechanisms.

Here we present the self-fulfilling prophecy as an example of such a mechanism. Let us say that the management at a company writes something like the following in a newsletter to the staff: ‘Next year this company will come up with a very negative result, due to decreased production. Therefore, the number of employees will most likely have to be significantly reduced.’ If the staff members believe that this is likely to happen, some of them will become less motivated to work, and they will actually begin to produce less and start looking for new jobs. This makes the management’s description of the situation seem correct, which makes more staff members become less motivated to produce. And because the workers successively work less, fewer goods and services are produced, which in fact leads to a negative result for the company.

Mechanism = powers + macro social interaction and structure. The mechanism consists of powers in terms of causes, motives, considerations, choices and collective social actions at societal level. The powers are mediated and work
by means of macro social interaction (social interplay within and between societies), but also through social and material structures (e.g., the bank system, political parties, educational systems, the church and different artefacts) = macro social mechanisms.

A classical example, borrowed from Max Weber, is one of the mechanisms behind the origin of Western capitalism. In brief, there is agreement, a spiritual affinity, between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. The Protestant believers – especially Calvinists who thought that every human’s life was predestined – looked for ‘evidence’ that showed that they were among God’s chosen people. Consequently, they were enjoined to live virtuous, ascetic, hard-working lives and to reinvest their surplus. This way of life had an unintended outcome that laid the foundation for modern capitalism in the form of an extensive accumulation of capital, and an entirely rationalized pattern of actions.9

The above-mentioned mechanisms are the types of social mechanisms – micro, meso and macro – that primarily capture our interest when we discuss social work. That is because social work is heavily dependent on relational aspects (trust, warmth, caring, empathy, mutual affirmation etc.), but also embedded in organizational and societal contexts. Due to the critical realist notion of the stratification of reality10 we are referring to a social stratum with its unique mechanisms. The underlying psychological stratum is an important precondition for the social stratum, but through a process of emergence the social stratum is qualitatively different and non-reducible to underlying strata. Before turning to the methodological considerations, we summarize our view of generative mechanisms in social work.

2.1. Generative mechanisms in social work practice: a summarizing definition

Social mechanisms in social work practice consist of a combination of powers in terms of causes, motives, considerations and choices, but also social interaction. In addition, human intentions are externalized in and by means of social interaction. The mechanisms exist as a potentiality in the combination of these components, but for their mediation, i.e. in order to work, they are simultaneously dependent on interaction between interpreting and choosing subjects (externalization of intentions) and auspicious contextual conditions (social and/or material structures). Consequently, social interaction is at the same time both a constitutive part of social inter-

vention mechanisms and a mediating condition. Sometimes these mechanisms are *activated* by interventions, and sometimes the mechanisms *activate* interventions (through the actors).

So far we have discussed our view of generative mechanisms in social work practice as a theoretical concept. In what follows we describe and exemplify how these mechanisms can be investigated in empirical research.

3. How can Mechanisms be Identified, Described and Conceptualized?

This question is fundamental for the critical realist analysis of social work practice. In this section we suggest and provide examples of different methodological steps in the analysis of generative mechanisms within the personal social services. The suggestions and examples are gathered from our own empirical research. We hold that mechanisms can be revealed in different ways,11 we do not claim that we use and describe the optimal procedure. However, our approach comprises a number of elements used by other researchers, and it is largely based on a model of the critical realistic research process constructed by Danermark et al.12 This research model, in turn, builds on two critical realist models that were introduced by Bhaskar: RRREI (resolution, redescription, retroduction, elimination, identification) and DREI (description, retroduction, elimination, identification).13 We do not claim that our analysis develops any of these models, but we hope that our analysis shows how this kind of model can be used when analysing social work practice.

Our model consists of five different steps, which are described below along with examples from different empirical projects concerning generative mechanisms. One of the studies builds on interviews with former clients in personal social services (PSS), hereafter named the *PSS-project*.14 The other study is a combined research and developmental project concerning the open-care treatment of adolescents, hereafter named the *Youth-project*.15 The structuring of our model in five distinct steps might give the impression of a rather rigid research process, which is why we want to stress that the descrip-

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11 See for example Kazi 2003; Pawson and Tilley 1997.
12 See chapter 4 in Danermark et al. [1997] 2002. In their model, Danermark and colleagues include six steps, where the last but one step is a comparison between different theories and abstractions. This step is excluded in our model, as it is mainly a theory-building one, rather than offering explanations based on existing theory.
14 Morén and Blom 2003a.
tion is held to be valid in principle. In practice, there are no distinct borders between some of the steps and sometimes it is necessary to go back and forth between them as a part of the process.

Step 1. Observation/description
Step 2. Division and sorting
Step 3. Abduction/redescription/theoretical reinterpretation
Step 4. Retroduction
Step 5. Contextualization/concretization

Step 1. Observation/description
The first step of the process is to observe and empirically describe the research object. Taking the Youth-project as an example, two social workers documented their work with clients (according to the researchers’ instructions), and as researchers we conducted interviews with some former clients. According to the previously developed CAIMeR-theory,\(^\text{16}\) we needed descriptions of contexts, actors, interventions and results. In addition, it was necessary – as a basis for the inference to conclusions about generative mechanisms that caused the results – to gather information about the reasoning of social workers and clients in different key situations. The following examples are brief excerpts from the two types of data: the documentation of a social worker and a client interview.

… we have continued with motivational treatment, also continued to form a plan for the treatment. I have several times, but without success, tried to get him to formulate his own goals and intentions with the treatment. Finally, he seemed to loosen up when I put forward the questions, ‘What are we going to talk about during our meetings?’ and ‘What is the purpose of it?’ I have also given him homework to do several times. One type of task is to do things in order to feel good, e.g. listen to music that makes him feel good … writing poems and drawing pictures … We have also focused on obstacles he experiences to stay sober and tried to minimize them. (Excerpt from the social worker’s documentation of client work)

… she was kind of a pal, a little special maybe. At the Youth-project she has been like a pal, I have come here and within these four walls we have been sitting down and sorting things out. And at the same time life has continued out there. When one thinks of a therapist, one often imagines, like in a movie, a patient lying on a sofa and someone in a suit sitting beside you talking. But at the Youth-project it has been more like visiting a nice person, drinking coffee and talking. (Excerpt from interview with one of the clients)

\(^{16}\) CAIMeR is an acronym for Context, Actors, Interventions, Mechanisms and Results. CAIMeR as a conceptual model and as a theory is presented in Blom and Morén 2010.
All in all the empirical material in the Youth-project comprised 100 pages of transcribed interviews and 35 pages of social-worker documentation. In addition, we documented our own observations and gathered oral information from regular meetings with the social workers. All these observations, which were primarily descriptive in character, constituted the building blocks for our descriptions and formed a basis for the analysis.

Step 2. Division and sorting
The second step implies that the empirical material gathered in this way is analysed (divided up) into smaller entities. In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the material, we read through each transcript at least once. Thereafter, all the text units were coded, i.e. assigned theoretical meanings. Using the analysis programme NUD*IST, the material was sorted into 25 different categories by placing all the text units that were assigned a certain code (e.g. Social worker’s methods/approaches) in the same category. An example of the way the text units were indexed (sorted) according to assigned codes can be seen below.

4. The Content of Interventions

4.1. Social worker’s methods/approaches

I am guiding her … getting her to articulate her life situation and her own solutions. I feed back thoughts, ideas and reflections by putting forward questions, mediating experiences and making her reflect on her own situation. (Excerpt from the social worker’s documentation)

4.2. The client’s efforts/life strategies/attitudes

As I thought that I never could stay sober, I had to overcome a big hurdle … I thought there would never be a chance of making this work. I started to think differently. Who am I? What do I need? Do I have to drink every weekend? Is it good for me? (Excerpt from interview with client)

The coding and indexing served as a way of ordering the multitude of particulars in the empirical material and providing an overview. We want to emphasize that dividing and structuring of the material by means of NUD*IST created a practical database that made it possible to carry out the following steps in the analysis in a more systematic way.

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QSR NUD*IST version 6. NUD*IST means Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing.
Step 3. Abduction/redescription/theoretical reinterpretation

Abduction means that single events or occurrences – by means of concepts, theory and models – are described and interpreted as expressions of more general phenomena.\(^\text{18}\) For example, the single occurrence that a person anxiously and suspiciously turns around when meeting people in the street can theoretically be described and reinterpreted as the ‘general’ phenomenon of paranoia.\(^\text{19}\) In other words, something that is concrete and particular is reinterpreted as something more general and abstract.

We used abduction on several occasions and in somewhat different ways. The assumptions about the mechanisms that were used in the Youth-project originated from the PSS-project, in which a number of mechanisms were primarily identified.\(^\text{20}\) In the beginning of the PSS-project we had no specific theoretical assumptions about generative mechanisms in social work, but we did have general assumptions about the possibilities of explaining social events by identifying underlying mechanisms. The project was also guided by theory in the form of some basic concepts (i.e. life-adjustment and life-transformation) that were gathered from the theory on social work practice that was developed earlier by one of us.\(^\text{21}\) By means of those concepts we were able to redescribe and theoretically reinterpret the former client’s descriptions of their contacts with the PSS. Below are a number of examples concerning the way statements about social workers’ interventions (the upper paragraph) were theoretically interpreted.\(^\text{22}\)

\[\ldots\] often she went to the other social workers and said to them: calm down, it wasn’t that way! ... we felt that we had her on our side. She was committed and she cared ... she really wanted that everything should work well. Sometimes she came and praised us, even if we had only made little progress, and said: it’s great that you have done this; it makes me glad to see this! The most important thing for us was the whole ‘package’ ... it was rather elaborated. It was a good treatment plan, it was the actual treatment, it was the care afterwards, and it was the drug control. She helped us move to another flat ... and I could go to therapy and talk. (Excerpt from the interview with Sven and Anita)

The interventions consist of an intricate combination of practical/money/human assistance, an act of balance in the borderland between adjustment and transformation. Several single interventions seem to be important by themselves, but without being sufficient ... (Excerpt from a research report)\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{19}\) Thomas and Pierson 1995.
\(^{20}\) Morén and Blom 2003a, 2003b.
\(^{22}\) Morén and Blom 2003a.
\(^{23}\) Morén and Blom 2003a.

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Thus, in the PSS-project, the abduction was initially made through the use of theory, and mainly in a descriptive way. After this initial phase, we formulated a number of tentative assumptions about generative mechanisms in social work practice, which were used as the theoretical base for the later phase of the abduction. These assumptions were developed further, and at the end of the analysis of the PSS-project they formed five different types of mechanisms in social work.24

Consequently, as we entered the Youth-project some years later, we already had a number of specific and relatively elaborated assumptions about mechanisms in social work practice from the outset. Therefore, the abduction in the Youth-project implied that descriptions made by the social workers and the former clients were set in another context of ideas and could be interpreted beyond mere descriptions. For example, the following statement about the Youth-project’s interior environment and social climate was interpreted as indicating the existence of mechanisms in the direct intervention context:25

… I come here, and then she asks if I want tea or if I want buns, or if I want sandwiches or so. She’s not serving me or putting things on the table, okay, sometimes she might do that. But, you can take what you want, it’s like if you actually lived here. Then she asks you to choose a room. You have so many possibilities to choose things here. It’s so welcoming. Everybody in the staff says hello. It’s like coming home after school when your parents say hello to you… (Excerpt from the interview with Carole)

It should be noted that the Youth-project abduction had, in reality, already started in connection with the coding of the empirical material during step 2. The actual coding implied the viewing and characterization of every single statement as something (e.g. in terms of an intervention or a result), which was necessary in order to divide and sort the empirical material in connection to our CAIMeR-theory.

Step 4. Retroduction
A further step in accordance with the critical realist research process is the form of inference/thought operation that is called retroduction. The aim is to answer questions such as: What is fundamentally constitutive for the structures and relations (X) that are studied? How is X possible? What properties must exist for X to be what X is? What causal mechanisms are related to X?26 Thus, in principle, the primary aim throughout this step is to identify and describe the generative mechanisms that can explain a phenomenon.

24 Morén and Blom 2003a, 2003b.
However, *in practice*, the process of explanation already begins during the third step, that is, if one makes theoretical redescriptions by using a sufficiently potent theory in relation to the studied phenomenon during abduction.

As mentioned above, the mechanism concepts we discuss emanate from the PSS-project. In that project transfactual thinking was the most important aspect of the retroduction. This means that we, by way of analytical reasoning, tried to understand what fundamentally constitutive elements must exist if human change is to be possible. The following are examples of the transfactual questions that we asked: *Would threats of coercive measures have been effective if the social worker had been unable to realize them? Would the client’s own request for institutional care have been achievable without her desire for change? Would the radical transformation of her life-situation have been realizable with a client who was unable to make efforts herself?*

The answers to these and other transfactual questions meant that we had theoretical assumptions about the existence of intervention mechanisms in social work practice from the beginning of the Youth-project. Nevertheless, we conducted retroduction in this project in order to analytically scrutinize if these more general assumptions seemed correct in the specific case of the Youth-project. In addition, we needed to analytically examine the *pattern of mechanisms* and the existence of *basic social elements* that we had started to discern early in the previous study. We did this by posing three basic questions:

1. Which basic social elements must exist in order to make the Youth-project function and be what it is?
2. What characterizes these basic social elements and what kinds of mechanisms are they comprised of?
3. How must these basic elements and their mechanisms be combined in order to produce the processes that generate change?

The answers to these questions are exemplified below, with the basic social element that we named *relationship-creating* as the starting-point.

**Question 1: Basic social element**

**Relationship-creating**

**Question 2: Character and Types of Mechanisms**

*Character*

The first meeting creates personal relation and positive expectations

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27 Morén and Blom 2003a.

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Dynamics between roles: role-transgressions
Trust and respectful treatment
Lays the foundation for a positive response and increases efficiency in M/R/T (Methods, Repertoires and Techniques)

Types of Mechanisms
Micro-social mechanisms (challenge, risk-taking, role-transgression); mediation via personal relationship

Question 3: Combination of Basic Elements and their Mechanisms
In order to achieve results, i.e. betterment of the adolescent’s life-situation, it is necessary to activate their positive response. Without a positive response and the adolescent’s readiness to exert themselves, no change will occur. The activation of this ‘response mechanism’ demands a pattern of other mechanisms combined in a certain way. In this context, the basic social element ‘relationship-creating’ seems to have a character and comprise an array of mechanisms that assume a particular importance and significance – it is the combination of these basic elements and mechanisms that forms the basis for the gradual activation of the client’s response: a special combination of two basic elements and its mechanisms binds and activates the third one … The relationship-creating and its mechanisms, which appear to be a basic element with great importance, is in turn conditioned by the contextual contingencies and the mechanisms therein …

At this stage of the process we had formulated assumptions about a number of central mechanisms that could help us to explain the studied phenomenon. However, the process consists of one more part that implies linking the abstract assumptions about mechanisms to the concrete situation/context that is studied. So let us proceed to this step.

Step 5. Contextualization/Concretization

The fifth step, according to Danermark et al., is about concretization, which means to examine how the mechanisms that were identified during the previous step become manifest in concrete situations – specific contexts. The aim is to explain events and processes in these situations, as well as to study how the mechanisms come to be expressed. In our case, different people expressed contextualization and concretization of generative mechanisms, and these expressions were made on different occasions and in different con-

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texts (cf. below). One of the last steps in the PSS-project was to connect our tentative assumptions about mechanisms to concrete examples in the empirical material. This association was primarily made in order to contextualize and concretize, but also to investigate whether the mechanisms could offer explanations concerning the object of study. Below is an example of our contextualization and concretization:

**Challenge mechanisms**

The interventions are characterized throughout by a relation-bound challenge to the client’s attitude towards life, which in turn activates the client’s response. The challenge is posed by a relationship between social worker and client, characterized by an oscillation between different approaches in relation to each other. The social worker’s ability to challenge the client in their attitude towards life activates a decision: shall I go on as before or shall I consider a change? …

A concrete example is Linda, who was 15 years old when she was first noticed by the social services. In one sense it was obvious that something was ‘wrong’ in her life, but neither the social workers nor Linda herself were able to define ‘the problem’. Instead it took three years of relation-bound as well as trust-creating challenge-work – carried out by several different societal actors – before Linda began to realize and accept that her life was problematic at all. This consistent and sustained challenge-work successively came to activate insights within her that led to the first necessary breakthrough: the insight that she had to exert herself to achieve change …

Contextualization and concretization have also been achieved by applying assumptions about intervention mechanisms from the PSS-project, in the Youth-project and another project. In so doing we have made concrete connections to new specific situations and contexts. Besides our own applications of assumptions about mechanisms in different contexts, the assumptions have partly been contextualized by others. Pierre Engström,²⁹ for example, in a research project about non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Chile, identified the existence of what we denominate as role-transgressing mechanisms. Other examples are Anita Appelblad and Sandra Andersson, and Elin Westermark, who, in a couple of minor studies of social work practice (work with children/adolescents and drug abuse), recognized all the mechanisms that we mention above.³⁰

All in all, the use of the mechanism concept in these different contexts has (1) contributed to explanations; (2) illustrated how the same mechanisms

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²⁹ Engström 2006.

³⁰ Appelblad and Andersson 2006; Westermark 2007.
can take different empirical expressions; and (3) made possible testing of their validity. We consider their validity to be strengthened because the concepts have been concreted in different situations and contexts. However, this does not exclude the possibility that the concepts will prove to be wrong or in need of revision in future studies.

5. Response Mechanisms – From A to Z

The following representation of the process described above provides an alternative and hopefully a more comprehensible perspective on the steps taken. The description builds on how we operated when we unveiled response mechanisms. In the column to the left, the five steps of the analytical process are presented, and in the right column each step is illustrated with examples from an authentic case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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| 1. Observation/description | Description and illustration of Sven and Anita’s case

… Sven and Anita have been the recipients of a number of interventions, but the decisive efforts (interventions) were made by themselves, and they experienced them as very demanding. *It has been piss and hell! Yes it has. It was on the edge of what I could cope with during that time* (Sven).

More concretely, which efforts have been necessary, which were their own interventions? Interventions from the social services have been partly characterized by threat, partly by inducements. *One hasn’t had any choice really, we sort of have to … otherwise you don’t get … they said: ‘if you don’t take this job then … or if you don’t look after your job you won’t get any money’. This gave us energy, finally we really wanted to look after… Because you’ve had this as a goal to get rid of all the darned demands from the social services* (Anita) …

2. Division and sorting | Text units (interview quotations) in the category of the client’s own interventions

*Yes, the most important … the critical, it didn’t come from the social services, but they may have guided me to the crucial, unconsciously … because the crucial came from me personally. – From the moment that I decided myself, they haven’t done a bloody thing, it’s I who have done it myself.* (Eva)

*My own efforts, they are probably the crucial thing, I guess it depends on how hard you try.* (Gunnel)

*All contacts with the social services had been rather pointless if I hadn’t made efforts on my own … but it was thanks to them that I started to want to try hard.* (Linda)
### 3. Abduction/ redescription/ theoretical reinterpretation

The data material was reinterpreted using general critical realist assumptions about generative mechanisms.

#### Different kinds of redescriptions arising during abduction

**Mechanism theme: the client’s response and participation**

In the material there are many and varying expressions of the client’s response and participation. Sometimes it finds very subtle expression, as when Linda after one year of contact with the social services started to feel ‘somewhere within’ that something was wrong. Sometimes the expressions are more noticeable, as when Sven openly and honestly started to express his belief in a life without drugs. The client’s efforts are expressed throughout the whole course of change, but over time it changes character …

**Field of tension: the social worker’s offer/the client’s response**

We have realized that the intervention process seems to be constituted by interventions from both directions – from social workers as well as clients. The social worker is the one that enables (offer) and the client is the one that realizes (response). This implies that the effects of work with clients do not arise unmediated (as a consequence of the social worker’s interventions) – they are always mediated via the client’s readiness and considerations (the client’s intervention) …

### 4. Retroduction

The mechanisms were formulated and tested analytically, by asking what properties must exist for mechanisms to be what they are.

#### Example of retroductive reasoning concerning response mechanisms

**Response mechanisms**

Activation of the client’s response appears as a kind of key mechanism – but how does this activation occur? What are the necessary elements in the interventions that generate the power?

The client’s response appears as a key mechanism that it is necessary to activate in order to enable the result. The duration of the relationship and the trust in the social worker activates the client’s response, which gradually makes the change self-generating. The intervention process must consist of interventions from social workers as well as the client: the social worker is the one that enables and the client the one that realizes …

### 5. Contextualization/ concretization

Assumptions about mechanisms were connected to specific contexts in the empirical material; partly to explain the studied phenomenon, partly to test them empirically and analytically.

#### Assumptions about response mechanisms are connected to a concrete empirical context

Eva is an example of a case that is characterized by a very ‘long and arduous way’ before a turning point occurred. Several different placements in drug treatment institutions, more or less successful. Recurrent periods of relapses, detoxification and being drug-free. An overdose that normally would have ended her life became the turning point: a slumbering response rose to life and she started to take responsibility for her own change. How was this response awakened? Probably it was a combination of encounters, relationships, challenges and confirmations over a long period of time – difficult to predict and of a very subtle character, but anyway efficacious – that finally brought her to this point. In this case, the response became apparent very late in the process. It happened just when an outside viewer would have believed that ‘the race was over’. From a transfactual perspective, it is possible to assume that if the response had not been activated, she would have continued down into the abyss.

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After this methodological examination, the article ends with a discussion of the potential value of knowledge about generative mechanisms in social work.

6. Who Needs Knowledge about Mechanisms?

Just as in the case of knowledge in general, so knowledge about generative mechanisms – in social work practice as well as in other fields – has different functions for different persons. In this context we especially want to highlight the importance of this kind of knowledge for researchers and university students in different disciplines, practitioners in different fields and decision-makers on different levels.

For researchers and students the questions asked in a study often derive from their own interests concerning an area of knowledge. In order to satisfy their own curiosity the researcher wants to know more about something (which often goes hand in hand with other persons’ knowledge-interests). When someone is interested in explaining how and why something happens, this shows an interest in explanatory knowledge. For example: How and why did a specific client effect emerge in a certain context? Why did treatment programme X fail in a certain context in spite of its proven effects elsewhere? How and why did the client change, despite the failure of the treatment? For those interested in these types of questions, we suggest that the analysis of generative mechanisms is a useful approach.

When the direct work with clients is in focus, it is our opinion that if practitioners obtain knowledge about the underlying mechanisms that generate client effects as well as knowledge about the mechanisms that generate social vulnerability, they can adapt their actions in different situations in a more professional way. We argue that this kind of knowledge is necessary as a means to make continuous adaptations and developments of the interventions in regard of different people and problems in varying contextual conditions. It is probably safe to claim that practitioners must understand and act even in non-typical situations.

On many occasions, it is possible to identify a number of ‘typical social problems’ that can most likely be remedied by ‘typical interventions’ (e.g. monetary benefits in situations of poverty). However, experience tells us that many social problems demonstrate such a large variation that they are very difficult to handle with standardized interventions. For example, behind such standard labels as ‘crisis’, ‘abuse’ or ‘neglected children’, there are unique individuals who live under very different conditions. A crisis in one case can be about the death of a relative, and in another case about the bankruptcy of a client’s company. In both examples the causes of the crisis are individually
as well as contextually conditioned, which implies that the practitioner needs knowledge about enabling as well as disabling mechanisms so that they can understand how to tailor the interventions for those concerned.

Moreover, knowledge about mechanisms can be relevant for politicians and managers – in our case in the field of social work. Even if such decision-makers are rarely involved in direct work with clients, it can be important for them to understand how and why an intervention (e.g. a treatment programme or model) works, not only that something works or not. This is important because decision-makers sometimes decide what methods or working-modes all the practitioners in an organization or a whole municipality should/must use. There is a risk that such decisions are based on inferior or erroneous reasons. Someone might decide that the relatively expensive, but famous and fancy treatment method X will be implemented in municipality Y because an evaluation showed that it had helped people in the country U. However, if client-effects do not depend on method X (observable events) but for example on the practitioner’s commitment and cultural competence in a certain context (the unobservable mechanisms), then the decision about implementing method X is made for reasons that are incorrect. A possible consequence is that the cheaper method M would work as well because it was not the method X in itself that caused client-effects, but the generative mechanisms. Another possible consequence is that method X does not work at all because the contextual contingencies in municipality Y are very different from those in the country U.

All in all, we can see that knowledge about generative mechanisms can be useful in several contexts, in different ways for different persons and in many fields of practice. The point is that this kind of knowledge offers special possibilities to provide answers about questions concerning how and why something works or not in different contexts. Our experience as researchers and supervisors of students at various levels has convinced us that many people are interested in this type of knowledge.

7. Summing Up

In this article we have discussed the analysis of generative mechanisms by presenting a number of definitions as well as examples from social work practice on how mechanisms can be identified and conceptualized. Moreover, we have highlighted the importance of an analytical focus on the ‘underlying’ mechanisms that generate events, instead of only observing the manifest events that are generated by the mechanisms. We have also argued that this kind of knowledge is relevant in other disciplines and fields of practice.
We do not claim that researchers always must focus on mechanisms when studying phenomena in different fields of practice – clearly it is often sufficient to examine something with explorative or descriptive approaches. However, if the ambition is to explain events more thoroughly/in detail, for example, how human change is achieved within a certain programme, then we suggest that the road to explanation goes through an analysis of the generative mechanisms.

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