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Article

Inequality as a social pedagogical question

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Abstract

In his book *The Killing Fields of Inequality* (2013/2014), sociologist Göran Therborn brought together empirical data, theoretical reflections and historical and political analysis in order to outline an analytical tool for understanding the complex phenomenon of inequality. In this article, it is asked whether Therborn's framework, rooted in the idea that social inequality is a social construction that may be transformed, could provide one possible analytical tool that could help professionals in the area of social pedagogy to better understand inequalities and ways to combat them. Following the orientation of critical social pedagogy, it is argued that, in order to better direct the planning and implementation of theoretical and practical work aiming at taking steps towards a more egalitarian future, it is necessary to see the connectedness of individual hardships with wider and deeper societal structures of inequality. The first part of the article offers a short historical analysis of inequality as a question of social pedagogy. The second part is dedicated to Therborn's theoretical framework of the different dimensions of inequality. It is introduced within a social pedagogical context. Different mechanisms leading to inequality are also outlined, together with their counterforces, or the mechanisms producing equality.

Using Therborn's framework as an analytical tool, a suggestion is formulated on how his theory could be applied as a general framework for work in the field of social pedagogy attempting to prevent and alleviate social exclusion and inequality in society. The article outlines a set of 'social pedagogical tools for equality', the use of which should be contextualised within a well-rooted conceptual understanding of inequality.

Keywords: social pedagogy; inequality; equality; Therborn; agency; belonging

Introduction

Social pedagogy, defined on a very general level, is about looking at and pedagogically supporting the relationship between an individual and a society. It is ‘a theory and practice of people’s growth into membership of society and [...] a theory and practice for prevention and alleviation of social exclusion’ ([Hämäläinen, 2012](#), p. 8). Accordingly, two main developmental lines of social pedagogy can be distinguished: a so-called general line of civil education and a so-called specialised line of social care and welfare activities (see e.g. [Hämäläinen, 2012, 2015](#)). A broad definition of social pedagogy includes both lines, whereas a narrow definition sees social pedagogy as a discipline and practical orientation that deals specifically with social ills and addresses social inequalities through educational means. Even though we find it necessary for a comprehensive understanding of social pedagogy to include both the lines in its definition, in this article we concentrate specifically on the line of social care and welfare activities. Through a theoretical approach, we are seeking a conceptual frame for understanding social problems in societies as forms of inequality, and based on this frame we outline a set of social pedagogical tools to prevent and alleviate inequality. We understand social pedagogy as a theoretical and practical field, in which both thinking and action should be guided by a certain kind of orientation, based on values such as humanity, human dignity, equality and justice. We root our approach in the critical orientation of social pedagogy.

The starting point for this article was the difficulty we encountered in trying to find theoretical accounts advancing conceptual and contextual understanding of social problems and social inequalities specifically from a social pedagogical perspective. We have been looking for theoretisations that could also provide tools for developing theoretically grounded interventions. There do exist some theoretisations in the field of social pedagogy concerning *specific* social problems, such as crime and violence in young people’s lives (e.g. [Ryynänen, 2011](#)). However, the great majority of theoretisations in social pedagogy concern either social pedagogy itself – i.e. they are definitions and conceptualisations of what social pedagogy is and what it is not – or approaches and practical methods in social pedagogy on how to deal with different social problems in different life-stages. Of course, it can be argued that specifically social pedagogical accounts of social inequality are not even necessary, because social pedagogy, due to its very nature as a discipline, maintains (or at least should maintain) a dialogue with related social scientific disciplines such as sociology, social policy, and social work and utilises their understanding of the social phenomena it deals with. While this is true, it is nevertheless necessary to ask: Do we, as theoretically or practically oriented social pedagogues, really remember to reflect on what we are dealing with when we deal with social problems, especially when we are looking at different kinds of concrete social difficulties in people’s lives on the individual level? Do we recognise that we might be dealing with deep-rooted social inequalities when the field of our work is described by concepts such as social care, life management, or empowerment? Do we, ultimately, remember to look at our neighbouring disciplines to build, renew and challenge our understanding of social phenomena such as social exclusion, marginalisation, and social ills?

In this article, we have set ourselves an objective: to take at least one step towards systematising social pedagogical thinking relating to addressing social inequalities through educational means. This article is naturally only one step in that direction, namely a suggestion of one possible framework to approach and analyse social inequalities in the context of social pedagogy. Here we take sociologist Göran Therborn’s framework of social inequality ([Therborn, 2013, 2014](#)) as our starting point and put it into a dialogue with (critical) social pedagogical thinking. In his book *The Killing Fields of Inequality* (2013/2014), Therborn, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Cambridge, brought together empirical data, theoretical reflections and historical and political analysis in order to outline an analytical tool for understanding the complex phenomenon of inequality. Therborn’s analysis of inequality has drawn our attention as social pedagogues due to its shared commitments with the critical orientation in social pedagogy, such as a strong commitment to social justice and an orientation towards societal transformation. Therborn constantly reminds the reader that inequalities are social constructions, not some universal social facts, and as such, it is also possible to deconstruct them: to find alternatives and to strive towards building alternative futures. The necessity for this stems from the fact that inequality limits the possibilities for

a full and meaningful human life (Therborn, 2013, 2014). Accordingly, Therborn does not only aim to recognise societal mechanisms that increase inequality but also those that increase *equality*, as well as practical means to alleviate inequality – or to remove it. Building on these similarities, we investigate whether Therborn's framework could provide one analytical tool that could help professionals in the area of social pedagogy to better understand inequalities and the ways to combat them.

We approach the topic of social inequalities from a perspective of critical social pedagogy. Whereas social inequalities fundamentally relate to all social pedagogical thinking and work, the professionals' understanding of the scope of the work and the strategies it involves varies according to the orientation of social pedagogy they have adopted, whether acknowledged or not. The results of Lisbeth Eriksson's (2014) empirical study among researchers from Northern Europe in the area of social pedagogy concretise this claim. Eriksson identified in her data three different ways of understanding social pedagogy: adaptive, democratic and mobilising. Their differences are evident e.g. in the methods that are found appropriate to reach the goals of practical social pedagogical work. The adaptive model relies on treatment methods targeted to the individual, whereas the democratic model understands the group or community as a locus of social pedagogical work, and the mobilising model is characterised by an understanding that societal structures are an essential factor in individuals' difficulties and because of that, advancing structural changes in society is seen as a part of the social pedagogical approach (Eriksson, 2014). The different ways of understanding social pedagogy have their counterparts in the historical phases of social pedagogy. The mobilising model coincides with the critical orientation of social pedagogy (from the 1960s onwards), whereas the other two models find their counterparts in the technical and hermeneutic orientations or paradigms of social pedagogy that have prevailed in the field of social pedagogy from the 1940s to the 1960s and from the 1920s onwards, respectively (see e.g. Sáez Carreras, 1997).

We argue that it is essential to acknowledge the existence of the different orientations in the theory, research and practice of social pedagogy. They help us understand the diversity of the field without an urge to explain away the differences. There does not exist one singular social pedagogy, or one 'correct' theory of social pedagogy, but a variety of understandings (e.g. Sandermann and Neumann, 2014). Social pedagogy is a branch of science that has been built up out of its different theories and theoretical discussions, and today is a world-wide field of research and practice that has its country-specific traditions (e.g. Hämäläinen, 2015), but also more and more international discussion. It is thus a given fact that the understanding of social pedagogy is versatile. Distinguishing between the three orientations – hermeneutic, technical and critical – makes it easier both to see their features in common and to differentiate between ways of understanding the objectives of social pedagogy in theory and practice. In reality, these three orientations exist in different combinations and with different emphases (e.g. Schugurensky, 2014), and it should be noted that various authors argue that the technical orientation does not represent principles that are commonly identified as social pedagogical (e.g. Petrus Rotger, 1997; Hämäläinen and Kurki, 1997; see also Caride, 1997/2004; Sáez Carreras, 1997). However, as Eriksson's research shows, within practical work, it is still also possible to encounter technical or adaptive orientations (Eriksson, 2014). In any case, the framework of the three orientations gives us a useful analytical tool to introduce some structure to the multiplicity and, more importantly, to help us recognise different objectives and strategies in the field of social pedagogy.

We start the article with a short historical analysis of inequality as a social pedagogical question, with the aim of showing how inequality has or has not been present in the discussions of social pedagogy throughout its history. After that, we move to Therborn's theory of inequality. First, we take a look at the different dimensions of inequality and provide a social pedagogical interpretation of them. After that, we go through different mechanisms leading to inequality and their counterforces: the mechanisms producing equality. Using this framework as an analytical tool, we outline a suggestion about how Therborn's theory could be applied as a general framework for social pedagogical work that attempts to prevent and alleviate social exclusion and inequality in society. All in all, we argue that it is necessary to see the connectedness of individual hardships with wider and deeper societal structures of inequality in order to better direct research and practice aiming at building steps towards a more egalitarian future.

From social misery to structural inequality

In the historical development of social pedagogy, a path can be identified from more paternalistic and adaptive aims of alleviating social misery to transformative objectives of combating societal inequality. This can be seen especially in the development of the theoretical discussion and practices of social pedagogy from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s in Germany, which is the home country of the concept of social pedagogy and the place where many of the theoretical ideas applied today in different countries have their roots. Socio-historical analyses of the development of social pedagogy show that the discipline was born as a reaction to manifold social problems caused by the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation in Europe in the nineteenth century. In addition to new forms and quantities of poverty in the rapidly growing cities, the emergence of industrial society broke down the old social structures and thus the traditional systems of education and care. Families were faced with new problems when people moved to cities, and schools could not take care of the education of the growing masses of working-class children. This caused new kinds of social misery, such as abandonment, criminality and vandalism among children and young people. ([Hämäläinen, 1995](#); [Mollenhauer, 1959/1987](#).)

In Germany, the development of the theory and practice of social pedagogy was aimed as an educational answer to the so-called ‘social question’ ([Hämäläinen, 2015](#)). In the late nineteenth century, many kinds of initiatives involving new practices and institutions were created, e.g. kindergartens and children’s homes, and a multitude of actors were interested in developing work that could help the ‘needy’ children and young people. What was common to these intentions was that social problems were approached with educational means. Theoretically, this was due to significant changes in educational thinking. Partly this meant following the ideas of the Enlightenment: people were seen as individuals who have the potential to grow and develop and also to take care of themselves, and this potential needed to be nurtured through education so that people would become able to fight poverty. However, it was also about challenging the individualist ideas of the Enlightenment and working towards a more ‘social’ education that would see community as a means of preparing people to live in society. ([Hämäläinen, 1995](#); [Mollenhauer, 1959/1987](#).) These ‘early forms of social education manifested the idea of social pedagogy in which social ills are met by educational tools in theory and practice’ ([Hämäläinen, 2015](#), p. 1024). On the other hand, social pedagogy was seen as a field that had a societal role ‘beyond particular educational institutions’ ([Lorenz, 2008](#), p. 634). In the late nineteenth century, theory-building in social pedagogy was closely connected to broader political and pedagogical endeavours to build up a strong and unified German nation state. Pedagogical answers to the ‘social question’ were sought for side by side with political answers, such as developing welfare measures to guarantee a growing number of social rights to all members of society ([Lorenz, 2008](#)). Social pedagogy played a part in the search for answers to the question of ‘how to collectively confront growing inequality, disintegration and disaffection in industrialized, urban and secular German society’ ([Lorenz, 2008](#), p. 634).

Already in its early formulations, social pedagogy was looking for solutions to social problems on both collective and individual levels. It aimed at societal reconstruction that would guarantee both the cohesion of society and the well-being of its members. The means to this end were seen differently, however, depending on the ideological views behind the efforts. Those who were more conservative stressed the importance of preserving the stability of society by means of adjusting individuals to societal goals, not seeing social misery as a problem of structural inequality. On the other hand, those with a more reformist view emphasised the duty of society to take care of its members and to provide everybody with equal opportunities to develop their potential to the full. ([Lorenz, 2008](#).) This ideological polarity leading to more individual or more structural understandings of the roots of social suffering can be seen in the historical development of social pedagogy, not just in Germany but in other countries as well (e.g. [Madsen, 1999/2001](#)). The more conservative view stressing the adjustment of individuals to society was most explicit during National Socialist rule in Germany, but it can also be found in a subtler form in the post-war reaction to the totalitarian regime (e.g. [Smith, 2009](#)). What followed the Second World War was a positivistic understanding of social pedagogy that was intertwined with social work. The individual level of social ills was emphasised, and social problems were understood as problems in individuals’ traits

or abnormal behaviours. Calls for changes in society were absent, because the structural elements of inequality behind social problems were not studied. Instead, there was a strong tendency to resort to psychological theories and diagnosis. The aim of social pedagogy was to find effective individualised and adaptive interventions to normalise deviant individuals and to reintegrate them into society. This was the high season of the positivistic or empirical-analytical paradigm in social pedagogy, leading in practice to a technical orientation. (Hämäläinen, 1995; Lorenz, 2008; Quintana Cabanas, 1999.) Its individualistic and non-societal understanding of social problems was later fiercely questioned by the school of critical social pedagogy.

In the late 1960s a critical discussion about the conservative and paternalist intentions in social work and social pedagogy started in Germany, demanding that social pedagogy should instead be supporting emancipation and promoting social change (Lorenz, 2008; Schugurensky, 2014). This critical and emancipatory turn in social pedagogy took its main influences from the reformist educational movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the Latin American liberating pedagogy of the 1960s (e.g. Schugurensky, 2014). An interest in the societal roots of social problems was brought back to the fore in social pedagogical discussion. Instead of being understood as individual problems caused by deviant behaviour, social hardships were examined within a structural approach: they were understood as inequalities caused by different mechanisms in society. To fight against structural inequality, critical social pedagogy was looking for emancipatory education – but it also called for a political strategy along with a pedagogical one. (e.g. Hämäläinen, 1995.) In the lifeworld orientation of the German critical social pedagogy, this was expressed by Hans Thiersch as follows:

The role of the social pedagogue is to help people to critically analyze their problems, reflecting on the social causes of individual problems and to find options for a successful everyday life. The focus is connecting help for the individual with political action in the context of social justice and well-being, while recognizing social and political resources. (Schugurensky, 2014, p. 9.)

The most powerful single theorisation of inequality in the field of education is probably Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1968/1996), which has been adopted in critical social pedagogy although Freire himself did not identify his thinking as social pedagogy. For Freire, inequality is essentially linked to the situation of oppression, where the rich and powerful in society oppress the poor and powerless and dehumanise them by denying them their existence as subjects. Dehumanisation is at the heart of Freire's understanding of inequality: 'dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed' (Freire, 1968/1996, p. 26). The oppressed are denied the possibility of becoming fully human. They are treated as objects, and taught to think of themselves as objects.

Freire's thinking has been widely referred to in social pedagogical theorisations (e.g. Eriksson and Markström, 2000; Hatton, 2013; Rynänen, 2011; Stephens, 2013). However, it has been applied more in micro-level analyses, e.g. in definitions of the principles of equality in the interaction between an educator and a student or a group, in defining the dialogical relationship between a professional and a client, or when describing the process of reflection in group activities. The macro-level analysis of the relations of oppression between different groups in society has often been considered as being bound to the historical, geographical and cultural reality in which Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed was conceived. Thus, Freire's understanding of social inequality as dehumanisation, including the processes involved therein, has not been so widely used in the field of social pedagogy. This tendency makes Freire's theory of liberating education an often-cited example of the theories that have suffered from a process of distortion and 'domestication' (McLaren, 2009, p. 31), as it is often reduced to a dialogical method, without taking into account its original roots and aims as a structural perspective on inequality. In other words, Freire's thinking has been and is used in such ways that strip it of its sharp social criticism and 'revolutionary potential', as Peter McLaren calls it (2009).

All in all, the subject of inequality is very much at the heart of social pedagogy but it is somewhat under-theorised. We argue that it should be discussed more. What does it mean for the theory and practice

of social pedagogy to see that inequality is *the* problem to be worked with; that it is inequality causing the many different kinds of concrete social problems in people's lives, and that it is inequality that we should be preventing, alleviating, attacking and combating? What *is* inequality, other than its manifestation in poverty, marginalisation and hopelessness, which affect people's lives? To find answers to these questions, we turn to Therborn's theory of inequality.

Dimensions of inequality

'Inequalities are (...) violations of human rights, preventing billions of human beings from full human development.' (Therborn, 2013, p. 41)

For Göran Therborn, inequality is not some neutral social scientific category, but a normative concept that implies the absence of equality and, moreover, is a *violation* of equality. Accordingly, any account of inequality should involve a normative judgement regarding the components of a good and dignified human life (Therborn, 2013, 2014, p. 49). Therborn draws his definitions of equality and inequality from Amartya Sen's understanding of inequality as the 'unequal capability to function fully as a human being' (Therborn, 2013, p. 48), and he makes explicit his affinity to the capability approach formulated by Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Sen 1992; 2009, ref. Therborn, 2013, 2014, p. 54; Nussbaum, 2011). However, instead of taking the long list of capabilities as a starting point for his understanding of inequality, Therborn distinguishes between three 'basic dimensions' of human life to ground his analysis. We start our expedition in Therborn's theory of inequality from them, and proceed to show their links to perspectives that are central in the theory and practice of social pedagogy.

The three basic dimensions of human life and the corresponding fields of inequality identified by Therborn are as follows: first, human beings are *organisms*, 'bodies and minds, susceptible to pain, suffering and death' (Therborn, 2013, p. 48), as well as capable of development and pleasure. The corresponding field of inequality is *vital inequality* that manifests itself, for instance, as health differences between social classes, relative lack of choice regarding e.g. nutrition and lifestyles, as well as different life expectancies between different groups of people and between populations in different parts of the world. Second, human beings are *persons* who live their lives in social contexts characterised by meaning, recognition, respect and freedoms – or a lack of them. Corresponding with this source of inequality is *existential inequality*, which manifests itself, for instance, as inequality between sexes or discrimination according to ethnic origin or other minority position. Third, human beings are *actors*, with resources, aspirations and aims that can be attained or negated, 'capable of acting towards aims and goals' (Therborn, 2013, p. 49). The corresponding inequality is *material or resource inequality*, that is, an unequal access to resources. It takes into account the fact that a full human life requires a set of resources, and that the lack of such resources restricts the capacity to act. Such resources relate most obviously to income and wealth, but also to access to education and other resources that build so-called social capital.

When the three kinds of inequality identified by Therborn are looked at through social pedagogical lenses, there open up some interesting possibilities for 'social pedagogical conversions', that is, to perspectives that could bring Therborn's sociological theoretiisations concerning social structures even closer to the realm of social pedagogy and to the questions that concern practical social pedagogical work. The dimensions of inequality are thus looked at here with an interest in developing pedagogical strategies for alleviating inequality. Moreover, the focus is extended from the analysis of social structures to people as members of communities and of society at large. The social pedagogical perspective on the dimensions of inequality has directed us towards four concepts: belonging, recognition, agency and participation (Table 1). The first two of these relate specifically to existential inequality and the latter two to resource inequality. One may not regard these concepts as specific concepts of social pedagogy, as they do not originate from the usual theorisations of the field and the discussion concerning them spreads into the realms of various other disciplines. However, we argue that each of them embraces some central themes of social pedagogy, such as community and the role of the individual in community and society, in such a way that it is both justified and necessary to 'adopt' them in the field of social pedagogy as well – as indeed has already been done on several occasions (e.g. Cameron, 2018; Häkli et al., 2018; Hämäläinen, 2012; Smith et al., 2017; Stephens, 2013).

Existential inequality, understood as ‘unequal allocation of personhood’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 49; see also Bello, 2015), brings up the question of *belonging*. It directs us to ask who has the right to be the person that one thinks and feels one is in a given environment, or who is entitled to feel at home – i.e. to feel safe and comfortable – with the people, the culture, the material environment etc. that surround one (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The idea of belonging has had a central role in the theory and practice of social pedagogy: social pedagogical work is often about supporting communication and social relations and thus creating and strengthening membership in a community, so that one could develop a subjective sense of belonging with other members of the community (and society at large), a sense of togetherness. As such, belonging has been defined as a basic human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and it is considered to be fundamental to well-being because it provides a sense of connection to other people and a feeling of ease with oneself within the social, cultural and material context (May, 2013). In addition to this individual dimension, belonging also has a collective dimension, which refers to the social and political processes in which the definitions and boundaries of belonging are constructed, negotiated, disputed and performed. This means that belonging does not occur only in the mind of the individual, and it is not only a question of where one wants to belong. There is always the other ‘party’ involved in the process of negotiating belonging, i.e. the community that one wishes to belong to. Sometimes the negotiation is unnoticeable and belonging ‘just happens’, but the negotiation might also turn into a struggle about who has the right to belong. This collective dimension of belonging is referred to as a ‘politics of belonging’. (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 2011.) It brings the concept of belonging specifically into the realm of existential inequality: belonging is not understood only as something that happens between individuals and small communities, but also as having systemic and structural dimensions. Existential inequality restricts and prevents the possibilities for belonging by constructing barriers and status hierarchies between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and by denying (equal) recognition and respect. An intersectional understanding of ‘belonging’ emphasises the multiple ways and sources of belonging and their intersecting effects on the processes of constructing ‘belonging’. Apart from ethnic and national attachments, social categories such as age and gender, as well as linguistic, religious and family background, enter into processes of claiming, negotiating and reconstructing belonging (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 2011). The politics of belonging can also be approached from the perspective of recognition. The practices of denying belonging are forms of misrecognition and non-recognition. Inequality appears in these processes as lack of recognition. (e.g. Honneth, 1995/2005.)

Resource inequality, understood as ‘unequal resources to act’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 49), brings to the fore the concepts of agency and participation. They are concepts that can be seen as describing both aims and central principles in social pedagogical work. Agency refers to being able to make choices and act accordingly in a given environment, and having the ability and capability to give direction to one’s life (e.g. Biesta and Tedder, 2007). It results from the *interplay* between an individual with unique capabilities and resources and the contextual factors of the given environment, such as structures and resources. Thus, agency is not an individual capacity nor a power that one either has or has not and that one can utilise in any situation. Neither is agency something that the environment can ‘give’ to the individual. Instead, it is something that is all the time created anew in the interplay and thus changes from one context or situation to another. (Biesta and Tedder, 2007.) Paulo Freire’s (1967/1974) definition of the concept of ‘subject’ helps to clarify the idea further: to have agency means that one becomes a subject, which happens in the relationship between a person and reality. To become a subject, one needs to have possibilities to be integrated into one’s reality in such a way that one can make choices and also transform that reality. A subject is capable of creative – not only adaptive – action and change. In social pedagogical work, agency can be supported on different levels: it can be about offering an individual support in making choices in their everyday life and in finding resources and developing capabilities to act according to these choices, together with others; it can mean encouraging one to have a say and take part in the decisions in the community; it can be about together creating processes of transformation in society. Agency can be supported by providing arenas and creating possibilities for meaningful participation, combined with strengthening the abilities for critical reflection and joint action. (e.g. Nivala, 2008.) As Therborn shows, a full human life requires different resources, and a lack of such resources or a necessity to constantly struggle for them restricts the capacity to act.

Table 1 Social pedagogical perspectives on the dimensions of inequality.

Therborn's formulation	Social pedagogical perspective
Vital inequality Unequal life chances	Lack of necessary life preconditions
Existential inequality Unequal allocation of personhood	Lack of belonging Lack of recognition
Resource inequality Unequal resources to act	Lack of agency Lack of participation

What we have aimed to make visible above is that behind the questions that, especially in the practice of social pedagogy, are often approached at individual and community levels, there are systemic and structural questions, such as inequality, that require taking into account the societal level as well, as one of the ‘variables’ of the practice of social pedagogy. This means that the work is not (or should not be) only a question of ‘treatment’ of individuals or animating communities (even though it is at times interpreted as such – see Eriksson, 2014, p. 175) without taking into account the necessity to understand the structural forces behind individuals’ and communities’ hardships. Highlighting the structural dimension also stresses the necessity to develop an understanding regarding relevant and plausible possibilities of acting on the societal level as well, that is, developing political strategies alongside the pedagogical.

But let’s return to Therborn. He stresses that the three fields of inequality are distinct and all follow their own logic, but at the same time they are inter-related in such a way that it is not possible to grasp inequality as a social phenomenon without taking into account all three and the ways in which they *simultaneously* affect the lives of individuals and groups of people. A multidimensional analysis is, he argues, vital for grasping the very essence of inequality as a social phenomenon and finding ways to challenge it. It is not possible to pick one type of inequality without taking into account the other types as well, or without understanding the ways in which they work simultaneously in people’s lives, sometimes with different logics. Therefore, multidimensional and intersectional understanding should also be adopted better into the theory and practice of social pedagogy. Instead of building theories and practices to embrace one perspective, such as the perceived lack of belonging or participation, the practitioners of social pedagogy should better recognise all the different dimensions of human beings – as organisms, persons, and actors – and build their approaches to embrace simultaneously all three (and the relating forms of inequalities).

Mechanisms of inequality and equality

Therborn stresses that inequality is first and foremost a social construction: ‘inequalities are produced and sustained socially by systemic arrangements and processes, and by distributive action, individual as well as collective’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 55). This means that, as a socially constructed phenomenon, inequalities can also be deconstructed. To reinforce his argument, Therborn distinguishes between four mechanisms for the production of inequality and their counterparts, i.e. four different ways in which inequality can be resisted. These can be called the battlefields against inequality, or the mechanisms of equality. Therborn stresses that the mechanisms of inequality ‘operate among kids at school as well as among regions of the world economy’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 55). This is to say that production of inequalities is not some structural process that can only be redirected through high-level political strategies. It also works on the grassroots level, and, moreover, Therborn argues that the grassroots struggles for equality are often even more important than the ‘official’ political ones. A path towards greater equality requires, necessarily, favourable economic and political conditions but almost never develops without grassroots struggles – that is, without active people capable and willing to advance social transformation towards greater equality and social justice: ‘The deconstruction of inequalities will ultimately depend on the strength and the skills of the forces of equality’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 159). These notions lead us further in our social pedagogical reading of Therborn’s theory. In this section, we look specifically

at the mechanisms of equality through social pedagogical lenses by outlining possibilities for different pedagogical and also political strategies to resist inequality.

Distanciation – approximation

The first mechanism of the production and reproduction of inequality identified by Therborn, *distanciation*, is a systemic process found ‘in systems geared to producing winners and losers’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 56) according to a certain built-in logic. In a given social context, good and desirable characteristics, abilities and opportunities are defined in various social and structural processes. Distances are produced at different levels, from school to the world economy, and their definitions are led in favourable directions by those who have power. One example of the structural process of distanciation is when the education system is not based on equal universal access (as it is e.g. in Finland), but is divided according to the logic of wealth in such a way that the better the parents’ financial ability to invest in schooling is, the better education the child gets (as e.g. in Brazil). However, the mechanisms of distanciation within the school system also exist in countries such as Finland, where the educational system has been built according to the ideal of equality of opportunities, rather than the privilege of wealth. Therborn stresses that distanciation is first and foremost a structural process: to reach the ranks of the winners is never merely an individual’s achievement, as little as marginalisation results from an individual defect, as is often portrayed by (hegemonic) individualistic thinking (Therborn, 2013, p. 56).

The equality-producing mechanism corresponding to distanciation is *approximation* (bringing closer, the process of inclusion). It consists of different measures, such as positive special treatment with a view to evening out structurally produced differences and distances, and narrowing the gap between rich and poor in terms of income and various social indicators. From a social pedagogical perspective, approximation calls for, first of all, approaches that could facilitate the recognition of such mechanisms and their occurrence in the different fields of society, and reflecting on their effects. Perspectives on how to advance such reflection in practical social pedagogical work can be found, for instance, in Freire’s accounts of problem-posing education (Freire, 1968/1996). Second, within social pedagogical work, it would be important to construct spaces that could work as counterforces to distanciation, providing possibilities for people from different spheres of society to meet and interact. One practical example of such work can be found in Sanna Ryynänen’s (2011) research on Brazilian educational NGOs. Circo Picolino, a circus school in the city of Salvador, had introduced an initiative to combine their private circus classes aimed at children from well-off families and the ‘social circus’ classes aimed at children living in nearby shantytowns. The initiative had been fuelled by the fact that in Brazilian society, children from different sectors of society do not meet, much less interact in the course of their everyday lives, and this segregation is effectively maintained and reinforced by a school system divided into public and private schools. The joint classes introduced by Circo Picolino – a much more radical idea in Brazilian social context than they might first sound – aimed at promoting everyday solidarity, following the idea that ‘the richnesses of the different worlds can only be discovered when they are in contact with each other’ (Picolino, 2004, p. 51 – translation SR). The experiment was not without problems but, interestingly enough, these were due to wealthy parents’ discriminatory attitudes, not to the ways in which the children themselves experienced and acted out the novel setting of their circus classes – quite the contrary (Picolino, 2004). Initiatives such as this may help to break some existing boundaries, but approximation necessarily also requires political strategies – and a critical social pedagogue would include them in the toolkit of social pedagogy.

On a more general level, there are several principles in social pedagogical practices that support the processes of approximation, such as avoiding all kinds of individualised and segregating approaches, supporting solidarity and community spirit, and creating possibilities for cross-generational communication. Social pedagogical work that has community building as its aim can act as a counter-force to distanciation, as can different forms of community work as well. Moreover, education for empathy is also one example of a working method that explicitly aims at approximation (e.g. Raatikainen et al., 2017).

Exclusion – inclusion

The second mechanism of the production and reproduction of inequality is *exclusion*, which means division of people into insiders and outsiders, or ‘in-groups and out-groups’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 59). The rights or possibilities of those who end up in marginalised positions in structural processes, such as asylum seekers and immigrants, are restricted for instance by discrimination, stigmatisation or by building concrete barriers or obstacles (Therborn, 2013, 2014).

For exclusion, the corresponding equality mechanism is *inclusion*, that is, ‘opening the doors to membership’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 63) by different means, such as anti-discriminatory laws. Therborn (2013, pp. 64–5) argues that ‘inclusion is perhaps the most widespread of the equality mechanisms’ and ‘intrinsic to the modern nation-state’. However, in many cases the principles of inclusion are not fully realised in the processes of practical execution. This is especially clear when, for instance, the human rights declaration and the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers at the European borders are contrasted. From a social pedagogical perspective, the first and the most obvious question is how inclusion is (and should be) understood if it is to function as an equality-enhancing mechanism. In social pedagogical discussion, the prevention of social exclusion and the ways in which it is possible to support inclusion or integration have been the key questions since the times of the social breakage of industrialising society (e.g. Madsen, 1999/2001), and the centrality of the theme has more or less remained intact until today. For example, Hämäläinen (2015, p. 12) states that ‘social exclusion is today’s big social question’. Practical work aiming at combating exclusion is done, for instance, in the fields of child and youth care and youth social work, with the central aim of preventing marginalisation with interventions that aim at providing everybody with the life conditions and educational support necessary for well-being and personal and social growth and development. However, as already discussed earlier in this text, the ways in which inclusion and integration have been conceptualised, and the role of social pedagogy in their promotion understood, have varied both over time and between different orientations of social pedagogy.

The understanding of inclusion that appears as the most relevant when the deconstruction of inequalities is considered can be found in the discussion on emancipation originating in the 1960s, for instance in the theorisations of Paulo Freire (1968/1996) and Klaus Mollenhauer (1964/2001). Mollenhauer argued that inclusion should be understood in such a way that instead of adaptation to the current order, emancipation both from generational expectations and structural constraints should be set as a goal of social pedagogical work. Understood in this way, emancipation is a process of ‘critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power’ (Inglis, 1997, p. 4). It should go hand in hand with the aim of integration, understood as a process of finding one’s place in society in such a way that makes it possible to live together with other people. These concepts jointly address one of the basic questions of social pedagogy, namely, ‘the discrepancy between individual autonomy and the requirements that modern society impose upon a person’ (Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 1023), by taking into account both the need for autonomy-oriented subjectification and socialisation in an existing order (see Ryyränen and Nivala, 2017).

Hierarchisation – de-hierarchisation

The third inequality mechanism identified by Therborn is *hierarchisation*, that is, the different institutions that classify people according to more or less established social hierarchies, ranks and categories. These include hierarchies of sex or ethnicity but also more arbitrary ones, such as organisational hierarchies. The corresponding equality mechanism is *de-hierarchisation*, which Therborn defines as consisting of different processes of democratisation and ‘institutional flattening’. When looked at through social pedagogical lenses, de-hierarchisation draws attention e.g. to the idea of everyday in the lifeworld orientation and more generally to the ways in which relationships are built within social pedagogical practices. According to the lifeworld orientation, social pedagogues must be present in the everyday contexts of people, reflecting together with them on causes for social problems that are making their life harder and finding ways to solve or cope with difficult situations. When working in everyday life, social pedagogues need to be aware of the danger of colonisation and thus commit themselves to equity and to respecting people in all their heterogeneity. (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009.) The work in everyday life

should occur ‘between partners on an equal footing and with equal rights’ (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009, p. 138). More generally, dialogical relationships, with communication based on horizontal interaction, authenticity, trust and openness, are considered as the basis of social pedagogical work both with individual clients, for example in social work contexts, and in work with groups and communities. Listening and being listened to are expected from all parties in the relationships, and life experience is considered as valid a source of expertise as is theoretical and professional knowledge. The social pedagogue takes part both in sharing and reflecting experiences and supporting others to do so equally. Thus, the hierarchy between professionals as experts and active agents and clients as passive objects is dismantled. Everybody’s participation is encouraged. (e.g. Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011.) Different kinds of action-oriented and creative methods can be used in creating an arena for equal sharing and participation. This is highlighted for example in the idea of the common third (e.g. Hatton, 2013).

On a wider societal level, dialogue between different groups of people is considered as a guarantee for the vitality of democracy (e.g. Alhanen, 2016). Possibilities for bringing people from different backgrounds together to deliberate on issues concerning their lives can be created, for instance, in community work and approaches such as socio-cultural animation. Therefore, social pedagogical tools for de-hierarchisation are not just about horizontal working methods, but also about questioning the hierarchies in society and enabling public arenas for democratic dialogue. It is about education for democracy, understood in a very wide sense.

Exploitation – redistribution/rehabilitation

The fourth, and the most severe, of the inequality mechanisms is *exploitation*, characterised by categorical divisions into upper and lower ranks and different forms of exploitation directed at those in the lower ranks. Historically, one of the most flagrant modes of exploitation is slavery. Many contemporary forms of exploitation, such as the different forms of abuse directed at so-called cheap labour in developing countries, are subtler, but the logic remains the same. The antidote for exploitation identified by Therborn is *redistribution* and/or *rehabilitation*. Redistribution is most clearly linked to the means of political organisation and demands, whereas rehabilitation refers to more existential kinds of compensation, such as public recognition of mistreatment and public processes of apology.

Where exploitation and its antidotes are concerned, the most obvious reference and theoretical starting point in social pedagogy is Paulo Freire. In Freire’s vocabulary, the equivalent for exploitation is oppression. As discussed before, he used the concept to refer to all kinds of situations in which people reduce the potential for other people to be fully human. As such, it is a fundamental attack on humanity that relates not only to explicit oppressive ruling but also, for example, to the ‘ruthless structures of neo-liberalism’ (e.g. Freire, 1996/2004). This is what also makes Freire’s thinking relevant in contemporary contexts that differ considerably from the reality of Latin America in the 1960s (and, unfortunately, in many countries, including Freire’s home country Brazil, the current situation is again starting to resemble the repressive rule of the 1960s). For Freire, the antidote to the ‘culture of silence’ resulting from oppression was liberating education aiming at supporting collective reflection and strengthening awareness of societal structures. In other words, liberating education was a path towards collective transformative agency. It should be noted that this is not only a pedagogical method, as stated before, but a holistic orientation with certain ontological and epistemological standpoints that direct people to see and encounter both other people and the reality around them in a certain way, and the educators to comprehend the objectives of education in a critically transformative way. Still today, we have a lot to learn from Freire. His theories can guide us towards ways to support capability and willingness to advance social transformation into greater equality and social justice – which, in turn, are paramount for essential grassroots struggles for equality to take place.

To sum up, the way in which social pedagogy can contribute in the deconstruction of inequalities can be found crystallised in Therborn’s notion of the strength and skills of the forces of equality as a key factor in the deconstruction of inequalities (Therborn, 2013). Social pedagogy, as a framework for social and educational work, can provide insight, among other things, for developing abilities to understand the structures of society and to problematise them (conscientisation), as well as abilities to

take part both in respectful and reflexive communication (dialogue) and in the creation of a more equal future (participation). In sum, social pedagogy can provide insight for supporting the growth of critically reflexive citizens via its theoretical views and practical approaches (see Table 2). Herein lies the key potential of social pedagogy as an antidote for exploitation and for inequalities at large – if we just give a space for critically transformative thinking instead of constraining it with conventional and conservative ideas of what makes a good citizen or good education.

Table 2 Social pedagogical perspectives on the mechanisms of equality.

Therborn's mechanisms of equality and inequality	Social pedagogical perspective on the mechanisms of equality	Example social pedagogical tools for equality
Approximation vs. distanciation	Solidarity Community	Work with communities, community building Cross-generational communication Education for empathy
Inclusion vs. exclusion	Inclusion Integration–emancipation Belonging Recognition Participation	Work with communities, community building Arenas and possibilities for participation Positive recognition
De-hierarchisation vs. hierarchisation	Everyday Dialogue Democracy	Lifeworld orientation Horizontal communication Equal relationships Education for democracy Common third
Redistribution/rehabilitation vs. exploitation	Agency Transformation	Conscientisation Supporting critical reflection Education for transformation

Conclusions

The egalitarian focus has to be on all the multidimensional violations of, and man-made hindrances for, the capabilities of all humans to develop and flourish. ([Therborn, 2013](#), p. 167)

In this article, we have started from a notion that social inequality needs to be conceptually understood in order to seek solutions to it. We have argued that this understanding is not necessarily very well grounded in contemporary (European) social pedagogy. Following this observation, we have shown that Göran Therborn's theorisation provides well-rooted perspectives for theoretical and practical means to alleviate social inequalities and the ills caused by them that could also be applicable in the field of social pedagogy. A key driver of our analysis has been Therborn's notion of social inequality as a social construction that may be and can be transformed. Hans Thiersch has stated that 'we [social pedagogues] have two main tasks: the social and pedagogical task of developing forms, methods and arrangements in community affairs, and the political task of creating public awareness and advocating systemic reforms, and the two should go together' ([Schugurensky, 2014](#), p. 12). This idea is central in critical social pedagogy, and the call for the joint occurrence of pedagogical and political tasks or strategies has been stressed throughout this text as well.

We finish our theoretical wandering with Therborn's three 'decisive battlefields' on which the future of inequality and equality is shaped. First is the collective comprehension and the 'image' of inequality; second are certain social institutions, such as capitalism and nation, 'which have to be confronted and transformed for any major equalization to be possible'; third is the political battle that will decide and define the 'socio-political tipping-point between equality and inequality' ([Therborn, 2013](#), p. 166). From a

social pedagogical perspective, these battlefields call for thinking and action that, first of all, portray inequality as a real but *man-made* social ill that requires reflexivity, hope and so-called real utopias for its confrontation. Second, social pedagogy should work towards strengthening something that Therborn calls the ‘*civilian nation*’, specifying it as ‘a civility, not only tolerating its members letting their capabilities to flourish, but collectively committed to supporting and promoting those capabilities in their vital, existential and resource aspects’ (Therborn, 2013, p. 176). This stands as a social pedagogical ideal as such. Moreover, it crystallises the objective that, we argue, social pedagogy should strive for, with its social pedagogical tools for equality that we have outlined throughout this text.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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