# Social entrepreneurship, innovative methods and community development:

# Is it possible to avoid dominance from dominating discourses and the implications?

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# The aim of the research project and of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on what kinds of storylines and positioning possibilities the organisation SydhavnsCompagniet offers to their users, and whether these storylines and positions are different from the dominant storylines the users are offered in similar settings. The analysis covers which discourses they draw from, whether it is sub discourses as they themselves perceive, or dominant discourses.

In the analysis I operate with storylines, which in different ways describe ‘the good life’, ‘the good family’, ‘the good childhood’ etc. Although these pictures can be considered as illusions and non-existent they are used as pictures of something actually existing.

Furthermore I want to problematise the matter by asking whether the users’ positioning possibilities draw from a neoliberal discourse or a discourse about civil engagement in society, or maybe a combination.

# Outline of the paper

Before I begin I would like to emphasise that the following analysis does not question the quality of the social work of SydhavnsCompagniet. But I think it is very important to focus on the less successful things, which happen and which it is difficult to be aware of for those who take part in it.

In the analysis I would like to elaborate on whether there is space for the users to formulate and carry out in practice an alternative discourse and culture.

First of all I will explain what kind of organisation SydhavnsCompagniet is, what are its main purposes, what kind of activities they offer, who takes part in the activities, who is paid for their work and what are their main tasks, and what are the understandings of being a volunteer.

Furthermore I should describe my understanding of the concept of “discourse” and how some discourses covertly dominate, as well as my understanding of “subject”, “storylines” and how I argue that legitimacy for subjects and discourses can be different in different spaces. Due to lack of time I have not elaborated these definitions yet.

Finally, the main focus in this paper, is an analysis of an example, which is taken from my empirical work in the Second hand shop. (description below). In that analysis I will elaborate on how ‘good life’ can be understood and whether it is possible for social workers the influence from own expectation. Subsequently I want to elaborate on what implications a dominant storyline about ‘we are all equal’ can have for the participants.

# SydhavnsCompagniet

SydhavnsCompagniet is a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) and they characterize themselves as a ‘social enterprise’ and as ‘social entrepreneurs’. The organisation offers a variety of activities which focus on attracting and embracing socially excluded and marginalized citizens with complex social problems. SydhavnsCompagniet’s aim is to build up networks and break down isolation which characterizes the socially vulnerable people’s living conditions.

### Where

The SydhavnsCompagniet is situated in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Copenhagen called Sydhavnen (South Harbour)

The organisation is based in the local community and tries to bring in the socially vulnerable peoples’ resources in to the local community. SydhavnsCompagniet is a value based organisation which focuses on learning possibilities, empowerment and strengthening of the citizenship and basic life skills. They describe themselves as having a “cognitive motivating strategy” which they combine with “empowerment”. They handle individual problems as well as civil rights for the people as citizens. Their focus is to find people’s forgotten or hidden resources and try to put then to good use.

## Activities

### Community Centre

SydhavnsCompagniet has a community centre, which among other things is a drop-in-centre, an anonymous consultancy. They serve breakfast every morning at nine o’clock and lunch every day at 12. The preparation of breakfast is done by one of the users or volunteers, sometimes together with one of the students from the social workers school. In the community centre there is an industrial kitchen, where they have planned to create a social enterprise within catering. They also have a mobile kitchen unit so that where they can sell food from a train station nearby. They try to build up the social enterprise with employee, who is motivated to start a catering business but who needs some help to manage the challenges in the start-up phase.

### Café

SydhavnsCompagniet also supports an initiative on the main square in Sydhavnen where a young artist has opened a café among all the alcoholics, where he hopes to attract some of the more resource strong citizens in Sydhavnen – the purpose is to mix the citizens in Sydhavnen.

### Second hand shop

SydhavnsCompagniet also has a second hand shop, where they sell things and clothes donated by the citizens in Sydhavnen. In this respect SydhavnsCompagniet is involved with one of the richest neighbourhoods in the surroundings of Copenhagen, where the kindergartens donated all their left clothes to one of the poorest neighbourhoods - Sydhavnen.

The shop is open six days a week from 10-18 and sales amount to around 2400 euro a month. The employees in the shop are a mix of activated citizens and volunteers. Some of the activated continue working there as volunteers when their activation stops. The employees are ethnically and gender wise diverse.

### Folk high school

Twice a year SydhavnsCompagniet arranges a small folk high school where the citizens in Sydhavnen and the surroundings neighbourhood are invited. The number of participants varies depending on the program. In the last one around 30 people attended. The folk high school attracts mostly pensioners; this might be because it it is held in the daytime, but it also draws in younger people who have a short or long term sickness and therefore can take part in the daytime. The program for the folk high school is a combination of visits to exhibitions, doing flower arrangements, painting, guided tours in Sydhavnen and discussions of e.g. ‘being a good neighbour’. Often the attendance in the folk school results in later involvement in SydhavnsCompagniet.

### Special celebrations

Around twice a year SydhavnsCompagniet arranges a celebration for something – new funding, opening of a new community centre, or other events to which they invite all local inhabitants, users, volunteers and not at least their institutional network.

### Handy-man-team

As part of the project SydhavnsCompagniet has a handy-man-team which is mainly composed of men who are in activation. They do small handy-man-jobs on SydhavnsCompagniets premises and they have taken part in the building of the community centre. The people sometimes continue in this team as volunteers after their activation has ended.

### Networking

Besides the activities SydhavnsCompagniet arranges for the citizens the organisation itself takes part and manages a huge number of network activities. They try to get political impact on reducing poverty, improvement of civil rights for the vulnerable, recognition even though you are being different and so on. Although they do not get funding for that kind of work, they are involved in many different kinds of forums, organisations, and network and public consultations relation to e.g. the municipality. In my thesis I analyse it as an institutional level, but I will not get further into it in this paper.

## People involved

### The staff

There are 5-6 staff members in SydhavnsCompagniet with a broad variety of educational background. Some are social workers, some have an academic degree and some are craftsmen. The number of staff changes all the time because SydhavnsCompagniet is dependent on different kinds of time limited funding. When I started my thesis there were 7-8 staff members but in the meantime one of the projects, which was an activating project for immigrant women, has to shut down because of lack of funding, so two staff had to stop. All the staff are engaged for short time periods dependent on the funding. Often some of the staff finds a new job before the project actually ends, because they may be afraid not finding another job. This unsecure economic situation has a great impact on the organisation according to both the leader and the staff. They describe these conditions as following: you need to have strong nerves to deal with the insecurity or a spouse that can provide for you.

### Trainee

Besides the core staff in SydhavnsCompagniet there is nearly always 1-2 students from the social workers school of who have to do an internship 6 months as a part of their education. These students often continue being volunteers after their internship. One of them describes it as “Sydhavnen gets in your blood”.

### Volunteers

The volunteers in SydhavnsCompagniet call for some extra attention although the gap between being a user and a volunteer is quite modest. As a part of SydhavnsCompagniets strategy (which I elaborate on below) they want to engage the users in their own life, and in the community, and through that create a network which lasts longer than the time the users take part in SydhavnsCompagniet. Therefore SydhavnsCompagniet emphasizes that it is difficult to distinguish between being a user and being a volunteer. And what complicates it is that some of the users often get in activation as a part of the social security regulations. To sum up, the people in SydhavnsCompagniet can be users, volunteers and activated – and one day they take part as a user and the other day as a volunteer. To complicate it further, the volunteers and activated in the second hand shop are called employees and they participate in meetings for ‘employees’. At such meetings a staff from SydhavnsCompagniet participates – and she is paid for it. It seems a bit confusing for outsiders but it seems not to confuse for the participants.

In SydhavnsCompagniet around 100-150 citizens visit or participate monthly as part/full time volunteers, users or activated in the projects.

# Theorizing about discourse, position possibilities and storylines

As above mentioned I have not elaborated on this. My main approach is the understanding of the concepts by Browyn Davies, Rom Harré (1990)

# The second hand shop – empirical examples

## The desire for a good life – what is a ‘good life’?

When I first met SydhavnsCompagniet I got the feeling that this organisation was meeting the users with something completely different than the users were met by elsewhere. The answers to my questions to the users about their engagement with SydhavnsCompagniet were characterised by an emphasis on new possibilities in their life. The users told me that they felt themselves recognized and accepted. SydhavnsCompagniet do not focus on limitations but on the forgotten or long gone resources of the users.

My first thought was that SydhavnsCompagniet offered something quite new and unique – and my purpose was to grasp soft impacts that were difficult to measure and describe. In order to grasp it I tried to encircle the staff’s thoughts about ‘the good life’. My assumption is that you always speak and act from a certain point, and my interest is to gauge whether it is possible for a social worker to ignore one’s own understandings of the ‘good life’. (REF)

I asked the two staff Pernille and Heidi directly whether and how they were able to distinguish their own perceptions of ‘the good life’ from others’ ideas of how you should live a good life.

When answering the question Pernille shake her head actively in denial. She answers:

*“We are not able to define it.[the good life] We have given up offering them our picture of the good life, it has to be totally individual – but I think we always in the back of our minds will have an aim of them being sober or having stopped smoking heroin – it will always be like that. But at the same time there might be a lot of really good reasons to not being sober or to smoke heroin or it is understandable why they fall back in it. I think – we think that you maybe have the right to live a very good everyday life even though you drink or smoke heroin, why do you have to be pushed out and hang out in Istedgade all day when you can be in here eight hours and get your social needs fulfilled – why can’t we give them that. So maybe we have an idea that they have to quit drinking, but that’s nothing – we can’t do it for them. We can’t do it before they are ready and we can go on in our way and motivate them. Some times when some of them get sober then they are overwhelmed with problems. It isn’t you and me who are sitting and drinking with happy childhoods and loving families. It is people, it is people who have lived their childhoods in institutions, it is people who have mental disorders; it is all kinds of people with crappy lives in their luggage. And when they get sober, then there has to be a massive effort to give them the tools to endure being sober (...) Sometimes you have that feeling that you damn well understand they fall back and why doesn’t the municipality take action. (...) Therefore it isn’t always the goal that they have to be sober. You can say that we in that way treat people in the same way by treating them differently. “*

The objective of SydhavnsCompagniet is to offer the users an everyday life in respectful and tolerant surroundings. According to the staff their role is to motivate the users to get the life they want. Accordingly the staff do not judge what is a good or bad life.

Heidi, one of the other staff, backs up Pernille’s views and puts it like this:

*“We don’t work with a definition of how to be normal. I think we mostly work with the idea that people have to feel good about their decisions and that is in many ways very import for us. An example could be: If you are feeling comfortable about drinking 20 beers every day, then it is not necessarily our task to work with them to make them stop drinking 20 beers a day. But if you feel like hell about drinking 20 beers a day then it is of course our role to assist to open up the view so the user sees the possibilities for – how can I be able to stop drinking these 20 beers a day and what can I get instead of drinking these 20 beers a day. If we are going to get people to fit into these normal boxes, then it is urgent that people wants and desire another life. And if the users have that desire, then it is our role and a task to help them.”*

In spite of the issues of dominant and deterministic discourses it seems like the staff have a feeling of offering something else than the users are normally offered. But what is it the users are offered then? Is it that SydhavnsCompagniet has another time perspective compared to the ‘normal’ life? Is it that SydhavnsCompagniet offers a place where there is space to spend the time lavishly? Are the offers in reality the same as those found under the dominant storylines of being a good citizen – but in SydhavnsCompagniet the users do things in their own pace? And is this issue of time and pace what makes the real difference between SydhavnsCompagniet and other comparable institutions?

As recorded above SydhavnsCompagniets staff has the feeling that they can disregard their own perceptions of ‘the good life’ and without any reservations enter into the users’ different perceptions of ‘the good life’. Although the staffs have the perception that they do not supply the users with certain storylines, they still do encourage them not to drink more or e.g. supplement their drinking with heroin. Even though SydhavnsCompagniets staff do not have a feeling of condemning some of the users’ habits, they do give discursively the users the impression that the best thing is to stop drinking. The dominant storyline concerning how to be a good citizen, which draws from the e.g. the health discourse is difficult to stay clear of. Even if you try intentionally to be tolerant and give space to different ways of living, it may be difficult to avoid the dominant discourses and storylines because the dominant discourses according to Davies might have a deterministic character. (REF?)

As above mentioned the users describe their meeting with SydhavnsCompagniet in many ways as a new kind of lifeline in their lives. But according to the users own story the new lifeline draws from the dominant storyline on what a ‘good life’ is and does not have another substance.

One of the interviewed users, who is activated in the second hand shop, tells in different ways that his childhood has not been very happy and secure. Answering the question about what he wants in the future he would like to take part in the job market in a flex job or maybe as a disability pensioner. It seems like he is afraid of not performing sufficiently well and therefore it seems like he does not dare to hope for a job where he is able to fit in. The interview user emphasizes his connection with his daughter, which he describes as the most important to him. He likes to take part in the second hand shop where he has the feeling that he challenges himself in a good way.

The staff in SydhavnsCompagniet tells me that the user literally has been standing outside the door for 6 months before he dared to go in. Although they were very patient with him, the storyline they offer him is not quite different from the ruling storylines on being a good citizen, which draw on aspects of not being a user but also a provider. But they do offer him something very important - they offer him space and place to take decisions in his own pace and they do not push him to do more than he is capable of. But neither the user’s own story or that of the staffs is based on something different than the dominant storylines of being an active citizen, taking part in the job market, having a good family etc.

To sum up; the staff claims of not bringing their own thoughts about the good life into their jobs is to some extent an illusion. The discourses are much more dominant and ruling than people are aware of. (REF)

My empirical work shows that SydhavnsCompagniet creates space and place where other kinds of legitimacy apply. As user, activated or volunteer in SydhavnsCompagniet it is possible; to be an active abuser as long as one does no offence to the other users. It is socially accepted not having relations with one’s family and children, not having an ideal of doing career etc. Although it is socially accepted not being as the ‘normal society’ SydhavnsCompagniet tries to make relations to ones family, make you taking part in the job-marked etc. The atmosphere in SydhavnsCompagniet is built on the pre-understanding that even though the users in SydhavnsCompagniet are some of lowest in the society all have dignity. According to the users, the activities in SydhavnsCompagniet has great impact on their life and they almost concurrently relate how SydhavnsCompagniet has been the life line they really needed at the time they met SydhavnsCompagniet.

The space SydhavnsCompagniet offers represents different ways to coming closer to the ‘normal society – the ‘good life’. SydhavnsCompagniet try to minimize the users abuse, but in their own rate. SydhavnsCompagniet help the users in many ways to maintain or start up a fragile contact with their families, to improve their conditions with the aim of be closer to the job-marked, empower them so they feel obligated to the society, be a contributor and not only a user etc. But in fact the most important is that SydhavnsCompagniet listen to the users/activated/volunteers and tries to do it in an appreciative way so they feel the users take the decisions themselves.

But again the positioning possibilities SydhavnsCompagniet offers are influenced by dominant discourses and storylines about the ‘good life’

There is a neoliberal discourse which rests on the assumption that the subject is independent and disconnected from the society and people are responsible for themselves and not a part of a societal community. Must SydhavnsCompagniet’s wish for the users to take actively part in the society be characterises as such a neoliberal discourse?

Does this wish of taking actively part in the society has to relate to a neoliberal discourse, which rely on the consumption which are where the human being is a free and self and is. Or could the desire be more emancipatory and civic participation which are thought in a social cohesion and social justice mindset? (Moulart 2011) Does the trend of personalisation - ‘putting the people first’, ‘the answers are to found in the user himself’ – have to relate to a neoliberal discourse? Or are there an ongoing struggle on how to fill out the discourse? (Murdoch 2011)

The new positions that the activated/volunteers are offered are on the one hand based on storylines, which depend on the subjects’ own potentials and wishes. But on the other hand the staff in SydhavnsCompagniet is affected by dominating discourses holding that a citizen has to be a productive subject. But it seems like SydhavnsCompagniet’s concept of ‘the normal’ is understood in a broader context in which you might not perform right now. But the way out of their different kinds of cries are to be a productive subject – the “product” is understood more openly and depends on individual skills and abilities. The new positions SydhavnsCompagniet offer is taken up by the volunteers as opposed to the offers from the public sector.

In a way SydhavnsCompagniet constructs a space where there are possibilities to create some parts of the desire the users have for a proper family – it could be the dreams of a well functioning family or memories of non-functioning family.

## A more mixed setting

In my observations it strikes me that there is a lot of quarrel between the ‘employees’ in the second hand shop. They quarrel about prices, the arrangements of the shop windows, access to the wardrobe etc. At first hand it was difficult to make sense of it. But after some time observing it I have an idea that it has something to do with what I would call a storyline that ‘we are all equal’, which is often emphasised by the staff in SydhavnsCompagniet.

Both Pernille and Heidi ensure me that they treat people differently in order to treat them fair and equal.

Pernille, one of staff, responds to the question of equality between humans in this way:

*“(..) but we [the staff and the users] are equal as human beings. I am not worth more than they are - I am just at another place in life compared to them. So I have the energy to help them in certain ways – but I am not a more distinguished human being in any ways. That is what we try to show them all the time – they have the full right in this society. “*

With the second hand shop SydhavnsCompagniet creates a space where it is possible to do as ‘they’ do in the ‘genuine society’. The kinds of people who are involved are quite diverse. In the shop it seems like there is a hierarchy, where the proper volunteers are in the lead. At first sight you do not discover it, but after some time it turns up both covertly and overtly.

As mentioned before there is a great feeling of ownership to the shop. All of the employees think of the shop as their own. In spite of this common ownership feeling the hierarchy appears for instance in the meetings between the employees. I took actively part in a meeting where I presented some of my findings from the shop. Some of the findings were in a way quite personal. For instance I discovered that many of the employees in the second hand shop could relate to the needs of the customers, having great understanding of their lack of economical resources. My thoughts about this was that they all have lived a life in shortage. There is also possible an inferential parallel to the second hand issue, where all the discarded items get a new life; I saw that the employees’ life stories could in some ways be compared to such processes. Around the table several of the employees in the second hand felt good about being described and recognized by someone from the outside. And then one of the volunteers declares that she finds my findings profoundly boring. It shocks me a little bit – but mostly it ended all common reflections because she had made it illegitimate to join the story that “in the second hand shop all of us, who needs a second chance can get it”, but rather “we have not at all had a life which was marked by shortage”. The woman’s statement had most effect on another woman who was sitting next to me – I sensed she felt like she got a punch in the gut.

It could seem like the ‘pure volunteers’ (like the woman who found my findings boring) do not want to be characterised or positioned as someone who does not fulfil the standards of the ‘good life’ and therefore in reject this position.

In reality this storyline ‘we are all equal’ might present some challenges to the persons who do not want to be put together with the social vulnerable in SydhavnsCompagniet. And perhaps they themselves all their life have been living on the edge, and having been struggling to take part in the ‘good life’

Another example of rejecting the position of not living the ‘good life’ shows up in an attempt to insist on the hierarchy issue. This could be demonstrated from another meeting between the employees in the second hand shop where they discuss prices, which they often do. It is decided that one of the volunteers has experience enough to set the prices. The volunteer who sets the prices, in a way, tries to make the second hand shop a bit more posh and therefore she often says directly, or mumbling, that the others want to hand away everything for free. With her comments she indicates that none of the others understand even quite simple things – and it appears to me like she is condescending the others. In a way the other employees in the second hand shop refuse this position of being ‘not business wise’. But it seems for me very massive because the group of ‘pure volunteers’ represent three sister, a very good story for SydhavnsCompagniet. And as a very important aspect; the three sisters are the ones who sells most. All the employees very often look in the black book where the accounts are listed and sighs with a little bit of frustration, and telling me that the sisters have sold for a lot of money.

The ‘pure volunteers’ want instead to position themselves as ‘helpers and having resources’ and not as ‘we take part in a shop which is a look-a like-to the proper society’, and therefore they often try to distance themselves from e.g. the activated.

So in a way the employees get a chance to assume a position where they can revive old skills or dreams about having a shop where you can be in charge make decisions. And it might be therefore it upsets the employees which are not ‘pure volunteers’ when this feeling is being destroyed by the ‘wise sellers’.

Several of the employees point out that they would not be there if they did not earn money. And one of the most important things is to make a good deal. Others say that it is the opportunity to meet with different people which is the most interesting, and some of them like to organize the stuff. All of the employees in the second hand shop have a passion for old things and they do not like to throw things away – all things deserve a second chance.

The implementations of competition, which is an important aspect of the second hand shop, holds most of the employees as very important. And it makes them insist on taking part in the shop. It gives them individually a feeling of ownership, which I have not seen in the same way in e.g. a drop-in-centre. The competition is reflected in the employees constantly look in the ‘black book’, where they put up their accounts. Who is selling the most? And not least in their attempts to constantly tidy up the shop and to have an overview over the stuff in the shop, which makes it possible to serve all possible and impossible requests the customers may have. And thereby create a proper shop, where the relations between customer and seller are maintained.

The staff in SydhavnsCompagniet is seeing their role as encouraging the employees in the second hand shop so they have a feeling of being recognized and valued. When Heidi praises the sellers, – they often reply with a ‘thank you’ and you get the feeling that they enjoys the praise.

In spite of the above mentioned conflicts, the second hand shop seems like a melting pot for all kinds of people. When you go home you have the feeling that everyone involved, the customers, the employees, the donors, have felt included and appreciated.

To respond to my question whether there is space for the users to formulate and carry out in practice alternative discourses and cultures, I do not have an answer yet! My aim is to elaborate on that in my further investigations.

In my further work I also want to elaborate on whether the dominant discourses within SydhavnsCompagniet draw from dominant discourses in the society or whether they are ‘born’ and have their lives within the volunteer organisation and as such could be thought of as sub-discourses.