Social Work in Germany. Developments in a professional field and academic discipline

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1. Introduction

In many countries of the Global North, social work developed as an independent profession and discipline in the 20th century. One of the countries in which social work became established as a professional field was Germany. This field's origins go back to the "social question" (Wendt, 2017). As industrialisation left broad swathes of the population in poverty and reified them in factories, city and municipal councils were forced to deal with the worsening social problems that resulted. Municipal care for the poor became more formalised and increasingly specialised. Churches and associations also laid the foundations for professional work in the social sector. On the part of the government, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck introduced social security. In 1883, health insurance was introduced, in 1884 accident insurance and in 1889 disability and old age insurance for workers. This was followed in 1927 by unemployment insurance (Eßer, 2018a). The welfare state was designed as a safety net for the population at large, not only to establish a form of social support within society but also to maintain the balance of power. There was movement in social sector professions, with the first training courses appearing. Social work's academic roots became

established in Germany during the 20th century, leading social support to grow ever more specialised and professionalised.

However, the history of social work in Germany is not a history of continuous democratisation, as might be assumed at first sight. It is characterised by ambivalence, ruptures and setbacks (Maurer, 2006) – e.g. during the Nazi period or in the case of the recently revealed abuse of countless young people in pedagogical homes – which challenge professional staff and academics to undertake a self-critical reappraisal.

The ambivalent paths taken by social work highlight how important it is to this day for social work practitioners and the academic discipline to reflect self-critically.

2. Social work in Germany. A mixed bag of traditions and terminology

In Germany, the history of social support has led to an abundance of different terms for professional social practice and its disciplinary research at universities and other institutes of higher education. This variety of terms is a sign of the different traditions. For historical reasons, in Germany a distinction is made between *Sozialarbeit* (social work) and *Sozialpädagogik* (social pedagogy). The beginnings of *Sozialarbeit* lie in charitable and benevolent assistance for the poor. Even though the term *Sozialpädagogik* comes from various contexts, it has a strong tradition in the youth movement at the start of the 20th century, initially organised by young people themselves. In that tradition, a discourse on social pedagogical theory discourse has been established which thinks of people in relation to their social environments and takes a critical stance with regard to a narrow, individualistic view of people. One example of how this perspective entered German social work theory is the term "lifeworld orientation" (Thiersch, 1992). This means taking into account the conditions forming the setting for people's lives in addition to their subjective constructions of reality: viewing situations from various perspectives and taking both aspects seriously. Social pedagogical theories are currently also drawing increasing international attention.

The fields of *Sozialarbeit* and *Sozialpädagogik* may have taken historically different paths, but they also share some similarities (Eßer, 2018b). To highlight these similarities, researchers from Germany are increasingly using the English term "social work", which includes *Sozialarbeit* and *Sozialpädagogik*, embracing the subject in its entirety. The authors of this volume work with various types of terminology: sometimes you will come across "social work", sometimes *Sozialpädagogik* or *Sozialarbeit*. This variety is an expression of the

heterogeneous discourse in Germany, with its historical specifics. In this introduction, we use the generic term "social work".

3. Structures of social work in Germany

In Germany, social work is located in *various fields of practice*. It is arranged by the state and by independent non-commercial or private commercial organisations. German uses a single word, *Träger*, to refer on one hand to the organisations funding social services (*Sozialleistungsträger*) and on the other hand to those actually providing them (*Träger sozialer Dienste*). Social work is funded by the federal and regional governments, municipalities or health insurance companies. Organisations which provide practical services receive money from those authorities to carry out social work on the ground. A further distinction is made between *public* and *independent* organisations. Public organisations are the youth welfare departments, social welfare offices and public health departments set up by the state. Independent organisations may be either *commercial* or *non-commercial.* The large charitable organisations, churches, self-help organisations and foundations are independent and non-commercial. They are involved in various different fields of social work practice. Their services are aimed at different groups of clients such as children, adults, the elderly, families, women, men, mentally ill people, people with disabilities, homeless people or people with a history of addiction. The fields of practice can be divided according to the social problems they address, for example homelessness, problems in families, poverty or illness. Hamburger (2012: 159) divides the fields of social work depending on the degree to which they intervene into clients' lifeworlds, differentiating between "institutions in normal circumstances" (such as daycare or youth centres), "normalising services" (such as parental guidance counselling or school social work), "crisis management" (such as foster families or youth court support) and "removal" (such as care orders or hospices). Hamburger's attempt at systematisation illustrates the breadth and diversity of social support in Germany, which is characterised by a large number of different institutions and organisations based on the needs of the different client groups.

4. A changing discipline and profession

So far, in offering an insight into social work in Germany, our focus has been locked on a "hermetically sealed" nation state. However, although social work in Germany is indeed a discipline strongly framed by the nation state, there have always been border-crossing connections to other countries (Good Gingrich, Köngeter, 2017). The fact that it is all the

more important than ever for different groups of social work professionals to come to an understanding across borders is clear from global social problems such as increasing social inequality, poverty, natural disasters, wars, conflict zones, related processes of migration and flight, and attempts to improve the living situations of people all over the world through international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child or the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Work in the social sector is strongly affected by cross-border developments, and is sometimes even actively involved in negotiating and working on them. This volume will thus always also relate to the balancing act performed by social work in Germany when working on nation-state issues and how social work is interlinked with global developments. This clearly defines social work's task as opening up to the world beyond the nation state and working on problems not only on a local and national level, but also globally.

5. Current perspectives

The articles in this volume deal with current social work issues, offering an insight into the current state of discussion on each topic in Germany. They all draw attention to the complex interplay between local social work and the field's expansion beyond individual places and national states, and the interconnections between national societal developments in Germany and those on an international, global level.

In his article "*Fields of practice in social work: interim appraisal of a dynamic development*", *Jörgen Schulze-Krüdener* provides a basic insight into the fields of social work practice in Germany. "Fields of practice" has two key meanings. Firstly, it refers to the fact that social work is a professional activity (and often a voluntary one) in a social field such as a family; a setting such as a school, a home or even a district, offering clients schemes to help make their everyday life more rewarding. Secondly, the fields of social work practice aim to shape and critically reflect on the surrounding circumstances, with the inherent notions of normality found in laws, institutions, organisations, service and funding providers and legal and political regulations. Schulze-Krüdener shows the need for professional reflection against the background of the current zeitgeist: in the societies of the second modernity, social work has become normalised as a service that is actually necessary for society to maintain any cohesion. At the same time, the fields of social work practice face the challenge of market and competition mechanisms, scarce resources and global change, and are subject to a constant, comprehensive process of transformation which needs to be given shape.

Katharina Gerarts addresses a specific field of social work practice in her article "*Child protection in Germany*", expounding on a change that has taken place in the societal and pedagogical perspective on children, once seen as "little adults" and now as actors with their own rights. The latter perspective is underlined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and has led in many countries, including Germany, to an actor-centred perspective on childhood in social work and childhood studies. Gerarts traces the historical contingency of images of childhood and shows how children's rights gradually became rooted in the law. Going forward, she believes that there must be cooperation between professionals in the healthcare system, child welfare, the police, courts and psychological institutions, and that this is the only way to provide professional social support to lastingly protect and sustain children in their lifeworlds.

Moving on from children, we come to the age of adolescence. In his article, *Matthias Witte* discusses the question of "*How best to serve at-risk youths?*" based on a specific social work concept that is still not well known in the international discussion. In Germany, socio-educational support abroad is anchored in Section 35 of the Child and Youth Welfare Act (KJHG). On these projects, adolescents branded as problematic are sent abroad to remove them from their problematic living circumstances in Germany. This is associated with the hope that the young people will acquire new coping strategies and transfer them to Germany after their time abroad. The author presents sailing projects, travelling projects and relocation projects, studying the paradoxes of relocation projects in greater depth based on his own qualitative empirical study. The case vignettes illustrate the very different ways in which the young people experience their stay abroad, depending on the kind of pedagogical care provided and the local social environment. Based on his findings, Witte argues in favour of a "culture of awareness" and for these projects to be placed in a professional framework. While they can be supportive and fruitful for the adolescents, they can just as easily damage and re-traumatise them if the care providers and attachment figures in the target countries are not professionally trained, or do not work professionally.

In her article "*A relational concept of inclusion. Critical perspectives*", *Caroline Schmitt* discusses the approach of inclusion, which is not aimed at individual ages or clients but provokes a fundamental paradigm shift in social work across ages and groups. Inclusion affects social work in all fields of practice and in work with all groups of addressees. Since

the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, at the latest, the term has been a subject of widespread discussion in Germany, and a current topic within social work. The author reveals the controversial debate which has been sparked off in Germany based on a human rights understanding of inclusion. She argues in favour of a socio-critical and relational understanding of inclusion as a task that spans not only social work but also politics. An understanding of this kind focuses on professional practice, the organisational structures of the social services, the underlying political circumstances and social discourses, examining them from various perspectives in terms of how they affect people's subjective scope for action.

In their article "*Social pedagogical research in Germany*", *Pascal Bastian* and *Barbara Lochner* provide an overview of the research approaches and methodological perspectives negotiated within social pedagogical research in Germany. On the basis of their own research project on themes related to refugeeism, they discuss not only the relevance of social pedagogical research in Germany, but also its points of conflict. They conceptualise social pedagogical research as a work in progress; an activity which requires further reflection in terms of its disciplinal and professional significance for our field, and which is closely connected not only to national developments but also to international processes.

With these five contributions, we offer a nuanced insight into the field of social work in Germany. We hope you enjoy a stimulating read.

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