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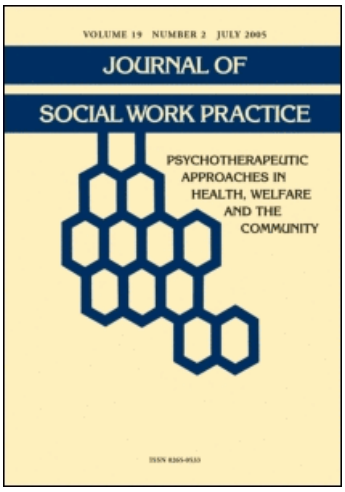


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# Editorial

Mechthild Bereswill; Gudrun Ehlert (Guest Editors)

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**Mechthild Bereswill &**
**Gudrun Ehlert (Guest Editors)**

# EDITORIAL

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This special issue introduces traditions and concepts of social work and pedagogy that have developed over recent decades and are currently being debated in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The contributions offer insights into different theoretical perspectives on how to conceptualise a theory of social work, professionalisation, skills and research methodologies. In spite of their theoretical and methodological differences, the articles have a lot in common, especially concerning the central social work discourses in the German-speaking countries (the concept of social work combines the traditions of social welfare and health with the traditions of social pedagogy).

Looking at the history of social work in Germany after the Second World War, the strong influence of socio-critical theoretical approaches on the development of social work in Western Germany in the 1970s should be mentioned first. This has been reflected in fierce debates on the relevance of social management and quality assurance since the beginning of the 1990s, and in current discourses on the 'activating welfare state' and the neo-liberal version of self-responsibility (Anhorn & Bettinger, 2005; Bütow *et al.*, 2008; Millar, 2008; Widersprüche, 2008).

The various contributions are also united by a general striving towards a reflective self-conception of social work regarding the relation of theory, research, education and practice. In connection with this, there has been long and controversial debate on the question of whether social work is an academic profession or 'simply' an occupation (Becker-Lenz *et al.*, 2009). How can one acquire the complex skills/knowledge for acting in this field in an academically adequate way? What do the protagonists of social work have to learn and know in order to be able to recognise and work on social problems, and to influence social policy according to the interests of their clients? To arrive at deeper insight into such issues, an empirically-based theory is needed that focuses on the deconstruction of social problems as well as on the reconstruction of the experience and knowledge of professionals and clients.

The methodological approach of the articles in this issue is based on the interpretative paradigm of qualitative social research. The articles illustrate that research and the development of theories on the practice of social work draw on different strands of theoretical knowledge from the sociology of knowledge, interaction theory, lifeworld orientation and biographical approaches. Thus, they also make visible the controversial requirements for acting, the conflicting facets of the relationship between professionals and clients, and the biographical constitution of the individual's capability for acting.

The continuous reflection that accompanies the debates outlined above touches the domain of teaching an interdisciplinary field in which the imparting of knowledge is

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closely related to personal development. How and what do students learn? This seems to be a simple question. However, it has recently gained importance because of the fundamental restructuring of the diploma programmes into bachelors' and masters' programmes due to the Bologna process. This is accompanied by the challenge of conceptualising modularised study programmes that live up to the high standard of a reflective academic understanding and combine this with the training of the acting subject's professional self-reflection.

The contributions in this issue pursue a critically reflective academic approach to social work from different perspectives. The first paper, by Klaus Grunwald and Hans Thiersch, presents the concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care that was first developed in Germany by Hans Thiersch in the 1970s. Lifeworld orientation has become an important and topical approach in social work theory and practice. It demands a critical view and analysis of both life situations and social work. The structural and practice maxims of this concept featured in the eighth national report on children and young people in 1990, and the law of the child and youth welfare service. Nevertheless, lifeworld orientation is a complex and difficult concept for social work practice, especially regarding intersubjectivity in the professional context: it is based on the interplay between reflexivity informed by the open-endedness of the situation and methodologically-based approaches. This has been summarised as 'structured open-endedness'.

In the next paper Burkhard Müller, who has analysed the 'working alliance' and 'structured open-endedness' in several articles and books, shows his intersubjective approach to social work practice, highlighting the basic skills of a self-reflective professional. He offers a framework for reflection on social work as case work in a broad sense. At the same time, drawing on psychoanalytic assumptions and critical pedagogy, Müller tells the reader how to introduce his approach to social work students, and states: 'Teaching social work is teaching to ask questions.' Reflecting on a case from many different perspectives, following Burkhard Müller's approach, is widespread in schools of social work in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

The article by Stefan Busse is focused on professional reflection and the interrelation between practical action and reflection. Discussing the historical tradition and current practice of supervision in Germany, he picks up the ongoing discourse about developing a reflective way of doing social work 'well'. First, he describes the parallel history of social work and supervision, and their differentiation and division over time. It becomes visible how social work and supervision have influenced each other, and how supervision emancipated itself from social work while contributing to the professionalisation of the latter. Using examples from his own practice as a supervisor, Busse analyses the relation between action and reflection. His article, which contains different case vignettes that show specific limits of reflection in the supervisor's inner world as well as in the capacities of the supervised, provides insights into the intra- and intersubjective dynamics of the practice of supervision. We learn how the social conditions, the organisational framework and the client's situation are reflected back into the process of reflecting on professional action.

In the next contribution the process of professionalisation is investigated by means of qualitative interviews. The authors suggest that some of the professional competencies of social workers have to become part of the habitus of a person. Employing Bourdieu's concept, Roland Becker-Lenz and Silke Müller draw attention

to the students' learning process in the context of typical action problems they encounter during their practical training. Their main research questions are: Do students internalise a professional habitus of social work during their degree course and their practical experiences? Which competencies are incorporated into a professional habitus? The researchers analyse the self-reports of students in a qualitative longitudinal study of their experience of studying and practising social work, and reconstruct their patterns of agency during the degree course. The findings show typical action problems that are then discussed from the perspective of professional solutions. Nevertheless, the questions remain: How are professional competencies internalised by the acting subject and how is their appropriation integrated into learning processes? As regards the theoretical frame of reference of the study, one of the main findings is that the habitus of the students was not changed, only their interpretation patterns (Deutungsmuster).

Reconstructive social work based on the development of biography analysis in the tradition of biography research (Schütze) is linked by C. Dorothea Roer with Leontiev's theory of the subject and 'activity' as its key category. In this paper the subject is understood as a 'biographical actor' constructing identity through narratives in a process of self-socialisation. The author describes this process within social structures of inequality and changing social policy. Biography work as professional practice, its aims and the relevance of a biographical attitude of the social worker are presented and discussed in the context of the current 'crisis of the social'.

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Cornelia Muth introduces intersubjectivity as a topic in teaching. She puts dialogue at the centre of her concept and combines different philosophical, sociological and psychological approaches to subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The theoretical background is laid out for the reader before the author discusses her own experience with dialogue groups with students of social work. The article presents a strong notion of intersubjectivity, enfolded in an interrelational space of open group work. Muth's understanding of dialogue is based on the philosophy of Martin Buber. It leads to the mutual relation of the 'I' and the 'You' as the point of departure for dialogical work that consists of reciprocity and respect for 'the Other'. Practising dialogue in groups leads to social work practice where the professional is challenged to find a reciprocal way of communicating with and relating to clients without denying different social positions and needs.

Wolfgang Gaiswinkler and Marianne Roessler consider the relevance of the solution-focused approach for the description and development of high-quality social work. They report some of the findings from a two-year action research and development project in the field of social work on the prevention of homelessness. The project was funded by the European Union's EQUAL programme and was carried out in Austria from 2005 to 2007. The paper begins with a short outline of the solution-focused approach, which has been developed over the course of 30 years by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and others at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (USA) through the analysis of counselling interviews. The authors show how the approach was adapted to the agency they worked with by providing different examples from their research project.

The contribution by Rolf Haubl and Katharina Liebsch is focused on methodological questions about subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the research process. Their research involves participants whose vulnerability is more than obvious: boys who have been diagnosed with AD[H]D and are therefore strongly medicalised.

Talking with children in qualitative interviews involves bringing out a strong notion of the child's subjectivity and building a relationship that allows children to express themselves. The article exemplifies this not only by presenting results from the research project, but also by discussing the research relationship itself. How can adult researchers create space for children to express themselves? Also, how do children adopt the language patterns of adults and experts, and what is the meaning behind common constructions like 'concentration'? Language is investigated as a product of intersubjectivity that guarantees a shared social world but risks the loss of the subjective meaning that finds unique expression in an individual child's appropriation of meaning.

Children as subjects in their own right are also the focus of the next contribution. Peter Rahn and Karl August Chassé draw our attention to the serious increase in child poverty in Germany. They used qualitative interviews to talk to socially disadvantaged children. Adopting the perspective that children are 'social agents in their own practices of life' they concentrated on the peer activities of children — seeing peers as a supportive resource in the context of coping with impoverished life circumstances. The findings of the project show that children with very few resources are creative actors and fight hard for successful participation in peer groups where they need to cross over to other social milieus. However, this capacity of children does not lead to a fundamental change with regards to them being in a socially disadvantaged position. The authors leave no doubt that in order to support children as 'social agents in their own practices of life' social work needs to intervene in social policy and build strong alliances with other agents of social justice.

We would like to thank all authors for their fruitful co-operation and their contributions. Our special thanks go to Lynn Froggett, who invited us to edit this issue, and to all colleagues involved with the *Journal of Social Work Practice*, not least the language editors. Many thanks go to several anonymous reviewers for their friendly and detailed comments on all the articles in this issue.

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