Knowledge production without a system? – Practice by good intentions? Meeting the challenge of modern society by developing Social Work Science.

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Abstract:
There is no such thing as an "innocent eye" – this epistemological starting point forms the basic assumption for the contribution to the discussion about the conference theme. This means that the "science base" which is obligatory for practical devices of social work must be a social work science. And it means that it is indeed quite appropriate to analyse the changes of modern society in terms of socio–political concepts, but it is quite inappropriate to speak about social work in these terms only.

That does not mean that the occupation with future scenarios of society and the role of social work is of no use, but deducing visions for "modern" social work within this limited (socio–political) scope will lead to only partial results. If we only think on this track, we will not achieve an empowerment of social work as a profession for the challenge of modern society. In the framework of social work science, microsocial blindness is just as useless as macrosocial blindness.

Key words: social work, social work science, epistemology

1. There is no such thing as an "innocent eye" – there is no way without (social work) science

"Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder" an English poet says, and the same holds for truth: truth lies in the eye of the observer. We do not have an "innocent eye", each observation is theory-laden, each term we use conceals hidden theoretical presuppositions (cf. Thies 2004). We cannot have an "innocent eye", all our opinions and theories are infiltrated without our knowing.

This holds for scientists engaged in theory production, for professionals and their practice (founding their decisions on implicit or explicit theories), and it holds for the approach to the topic of this conference "Challenges for Social Professions in Modern Society". For handling this problem of the impossibility of an "innocent eye", we need science as a way to critical reflection and falsifiability of our assertions, opinions and theories. As we know from Karl Popper: We believe that there are only white swans until we see a black one.

"Social exclusion" for ex. is a sociological term and directs our attention to social distinctions, "poverty" is a socio–economic term which directs us to financial aspects, "border line" comes from psychiatry and underlines personal dispositions as an important issue; one person may have all these attributes at the same time (cf. Serr 2006), but thinking along one of these tracks excludes the others. From this it follows: It is easy for a science to find its problem, but it is difficult for a problem to find its science. For a medical practitioner, only medical problems exist and none else, for a sociologist there are societal problems and none else etc.. Using specific terms restrains our attention and diverts it in each case in totally disparate directions. "Fighting social exclusion" was an ongoing agenda since the Express–conferences in Bellaria 1997 and in Ostrava 1998 – it can mould thinking in a certain way, because this term focuses on societal processes and excludes individuality. So the question here is which science is qualified for the discussion of the conference theme: it is true that for the "changing societies" the socio–political sciences are in charge, but which science is in charge of social work? Social work as a "comprehensive helping profession" (Morales and Sheafor1998, 39)

dealing with cumulative Problems needs social work science as a cross–disciplinary practice science.

2. Why social work science?
At first glance one can avoid many hot discussions, if one speaks about "social professions" (in the theme of this conference), but still there remain questions and problems, for ex. the above mentioned one: How does a problem find its science and its theory?

To speak in that manner is a compromise formula in view of the fact that social work is not identical in the different European countries: what in Germany is subsumed under Soziale Arbeit (integrating administrative social work and social pedagogy), is distributed over two professions in Italy: assistente sociale and educatore sociale, and in France over three: assistant de service social, educateur and animateur socioculturel. If one understands social work in the sense of the International Federation of Social Work–definition („*Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment. (…).. social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve.*"), it becomes clear that the diverse historically established structures cover the same range of activities. The field of social work in general emerged through a necessity generated by a problem structure (cumulative problems caused by diverse factors). In principle there is a homogeneity of the problem field with different kinds of "job division": "one hand" f. ex. in Germany, "several hands" f. ex. in France or Italy. Whether there are "social professions" relying on a cooperative approach or social work as a "comprehensive helping profession" - the central question is not: What does practice need? Rather, the essential questions are: What is good for clients/addressees? And: How can we know what helps?

As the case may be, the concern here is social work (Soziale Arbeit) and social work science (cf. Göppner and Hämäläinen 2004, 2008, Staub–Bernasconi 2007). "Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems…" – but which one to choose?

Social work science is a must, because it seems that a "theories" or "knowledge base" as a "science base" are not sufficient. Merely having a "science base" – common esp. in the Anglo–American discourse – for social work practice is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs, because this turns "science" into a self service store – anybody can take whatever theory or knowledge suits him – this arbitrariness does not deserve the name of a science (and is not useful for practice). That means that the imperative principle of rational decision making constitutive for science and for professional action is violated. The reference to "theories" or "knowledge" remains accidental and arbitrary. Furthermore, we don't find or discover reality, we invent and construct it. And the theories we use are truth machines (Göppner 2010). The moment we believe in a theory, it comes true and determines our behaviour. That means that the terms we use in theory production are not innocent. And why should this not apply to practice, for analyzing and solving "social problems"? Just imagine: What you may think is a good solution perhaps has nothing to do with the actual problem, but is rather more or less an outcome of your way of thinking – an alarming prospect! Anybody who fails to reflect on the premises of his viewpoint, is always in the right and becomes prone to wearing blinkers.

This knowledge production without a system implies an unregulated eclecticism, there must be a (social work) science for having an adequate basis for decision making. This holds for the construction of theoretical models, for the self-understanding of the profession and above all for professional practice which deserves its name. And it implies a practice based on the good intentions of notorious do–gooders, the science rhetoric serves as an alibi.

What can a professional practice build upon? How can a problem find the appropriate science resp. the adequate theory within a science? The social work science as a cross–disciplinary practice science is in charge. Unlike a specialised pure science such as Sociology or

Psychology (which works to gain insights for its genuine perspective in its special sector) social work science must be cross–disciplinary, because its work on models for change for practical purposes requires an adequate comprehension of multiply caused, cumulative problems: social work, if it overlooks a relevant side of a problem, becomes a part of this problem that it pretends to resolve. That's why a specialist thinking can be dangerous because it only allows to see, what its theories as spotlights allow. We cannot trust to a simple takeover of a pure science insights, because it makes us wearing blinds (psychological blinds, sociological blinds etc.).

A further reason for social work science is, that without it social work is exposed to the colonisation and fragmentation of foreign disciplines which imposing their own logic alienate social work from itself.

3. Implications

This argument of the impossibility of an "innocent eye" applies to theorists and equally to practitioners (they also have explicit and/or "tacit" "theories", i.e. the convictions on the basis of which they make their decisions for action).

What controls the professional view? Sure, it is a mixture of scientific theories and "silent knowledge", but the history of social work is marked by the futile search for the right paradigm which can provide social work with a professional identity: "Anyway, one never had a consensus about the social work techniques and theoretical references" resumes Robert Castel in his famous article (1998, 32). He is right and he is wrong. He is right and in accordance with Malcolm Payne who asserts "myriads of competitive and mutually exclusive bodies of thought" 1998, cover text). And he is wrong, because if we take science into consideration, we have to accept that a final consensus is never achievable. However, science has the advantage that it works on more sophisticated solutions for all kinds of heuristic problems. Science cannot promise a final consensus either, but with its assistance mere intuitively plausible thinking is replaced by reflected and empirically validated thinking – to the benefit of our clients (or other addressees of social work)

And most important, but far less debated: How can social work reliably programme its assistance by means of social work science in such a way that it is actually placed in a position to keep its promise to the clients of alleviating their problems? (Good intentions mixed up with commonplace plausibility are not enough). We have to search for methodological action models, which have an effective potential for really changing the addressee's problems and make us able to hold our promise to them.

Probably some of you are thinking what a colleague told me: "You know, I'm a practitioner, I have no concern with science". However, every practitioner is convinced that he is doing the right things, but who decides what is the right thing? The full satisfaction of our customers is not a yardstick: one person may be content, when we do the wrong things, and another may be discontent, although we did the right things. The search for "theory for practice" and "research for practice" leads into the wrong direction, it is not about "good" practice – what is good practice? If we have a good relationship with our clients? – Rather, it's all about the addressee's welfare and a resolution of his life problems.

4. The rapid change of societies demands a "new social work"? Yes, but which one? A plea for argumentation in a social work science frame

There is no doubt, the societal circumstances are rapidly changing. *There is no other point in the industrial modern era when the social risks and dangers of human beings and fundamental livelihoods through a hostile economic system were as far-reaching [as currently]."* (Elsen 2008, 262 – translation). This leads to the conclusion: „*Social work*

…must transcend the social flanking of the socially destructive market and defend and create socio-economic complementary and alternative structures. " (ibid., 263)

But this analysis has its presuppositions. In times of a crisis of the welfare state it seems that the time has come for socio–political considerations and for a redefinition and reconstruction of social work.

Let's have a look at the argumentation patterns: **"***Social services are 'daughters' of the welfare state"*, says Friesenhahn (2008), and the crucial question for him is **"What will be the role of social services in the future welfare structure?"** Apparently, for him social services and social work are dependent on society (if society changes, social professions must be redefined!). In this case, one can only count on human rights and anti–oppressive practice, on "strengthening civil society" and community work. But social work not only has a mandate from society (and is thus dependent), but, rather, it actively defines and describes problems of members of society as an independent professional authority. Suffering in life is not exclusively caused by societal structures: f. ex., the above-mentioned jobless person not only suffers from becoming unemployed in consequence of being laid off, he suffers from self-isolation, depression, resignation and "learned" helplessness.

In the consideration of the de–regulation and privatisation of the social in all European countries, Lorenz (2006) pleads for *"giving direct, personal interactions with service users a 'citizenship dimension' so that they become an element in the re–creation of social solidarity as inter–locking networks of rights an obligations"*. (ibid., 174) He complains that the *"lack of preparation for the rapid changes that face the profession on all fronts reflect(s) the relative underdevelopment of its political analysis and action competence"* (ibid., 175). And he comes to the conclusion *"that social work practice, communicatively conceptualized, needs to become the practice of social policy understood as social citizenship, which means that every intervention needs to be aimed <u>not just</u> at the resolution of a specific problem encountered at the individual level, but also at the re–examination and reclaiming of the sets of rights and obligations that make up the social sphere and which constitute the substance of social integration. This is a crucial dimension of every social problem encountered"* (ibid., 9, underlining by HJG).

So far so good – it seems quite simple: there are "challenges of modern society" and as a consequence, social work has to redefine and reconstruct itself. At this point the value of a social work science argumentation will become clearly visible.

One must distinguish the societal framing conditions for social professions from the origins of the social problems they have to deal with. Professions are obviously dependent on socio–political contexts, because their mandate is given from society. Social problems, however, do have socio–political causes, but they are mixed with factors external to society (f. ex. neurobiological and psychological factors) as well. That means that social problems exist regardless of whether a society acknowledges them (and constructs a welfare system) or not.

Thinking in macro–social categories leads to finding a solution rather within this horizon and thus to micro–social short-sightedness. This does not imply that these proposals are wrong, but it is wrong to propagate them as the new and modern ones reflecting modern social work. Castel, f. e., says in the article quoted above that in the case of joblessness people simply need work. Yes, but how to get them out of isolation, alcohol and desperation? It's not as simple as he believes in his limited (socio–political) scope. We must beware of regarding social economy and citizens' involvement (and the commitment to human rights and the postulation of social justice) as the single option for the future. "Citizenship dimension" is a new and fascinating option for social work, but we must beware of making it into a favourite reason for redefining social work. If each reference discipline attempts to define social work exclusively from its own perspective, fake solutions not valuable for practice will be the result. Theories are like spotlights (Popper) – you can only see what you have a theory for! By

the way, for the realisation of a citizenship dimension in counselling, we need instrumental models for which the thinking in socio–political categories is not equipped, it can only produce pseudo-concrete (s. below) "empty concepts", because psychological and pedagogical instructions are indispensable, otherwise everyday plausibility will take hold.

We must not close our eyes to "the triumph of the economic mind" (Keller 2007). What can we set against this, being somewhat more open–minded on the basis of social work science and thus taking to heart the "no innocent eye"–argument?

–   We must insist on human rights and name and shame their violations. But it must not lead always to eye to outside, an omitted inside reflection brings a good conscience, but nothing else.

–   We have to make clear that the domination of economics with the simultaneous neglect of social issues hazards the existence of democratic society.

–   And we have to stress social work's contribution to societal "functioning" (f. ex. young highly violent and addicted male school drop-outs with no future perspective are living time bombs if one does not succeed in "deactivating" them). That does not mean to stabilize the existing society, if social work take for itself a political mandate.

–   It also makes sense to prepare oneself for the future by sketching future scenarios and working out programmes for action.

–   So it is alright to analyse the socio–political circumstances by means of socio–political sciences, but speaking about social work is quite a different topic, socio–political arguments turn into "free–lance"–arguments and lead us to at least partially problematical conclusions.

–   But it must not be overlooked that the best raison d'être (right to exist) for the profession and the best advocacy for the clients (and other addressees) is an intervention which is capable of delivering our promise of helping to change their life conditions.

A view based on social work science tends to reduce the risk of making unreflecting presumptions and of being restricted on the theoretical, professional and interventional levels, which will definitely undermine our well–meant efforts.

5. Some remarks on the idea of a social work science

The message is quite clear: the discussion about the challenges of modern society must be embedded in an epistemologically reflected context: let me present some short remarks on social work science relevant to my line of argumentation: the subject matter of social work science, the multi–systemic perspective and the problem of pseudo-concreteness of intervention models.

a) One cannot claim a science for any occupational activity, as was done in the USA, where a BA for "hair dressing and saloon management" has been established – what is the justification for establishing a social work science? The justification must be an epistemological justification, which lies in the "no innocent eye" argument. The existing classic disciplines deal with "reality" from a special perspective, they filter out phenomena from a special aspect: sociology looks at social systems and social interactions, psychology at feeling and behaviour of persons, law at justice among the members of society etc. A counter–weight against these specialist disciplines is needed, because they fragment human action into numerous specific aspects. The real justification for social work science is the following. For programming professional action one cannot afford to wilfully neglect relevant aspects, because this undermines the success of professional action.

b) Social work science as a cross–section discipline corresponds to a cross–section profession: social work is multi-systemic (cf. Staub–Bernasconi 2007), it operates on different systemic levels: the micro–, mezzo– and macro-levels. It is responsible for cumulative problems, caused by conditions with various sources. Social work must be considered on all these levels; this also holds for projecting future social work in view of rapidly changing societies.

c) The term "pseudo-concreteness" comes from German life–world social pedagogy, it is used to designate a person's common sense thinking, which is not aware of the real causes influencing his life situation. Using the term pseudo-concreteness for intervention models here means that social work methods are executed without knowing enough about "what works?", "what difference (in intervention) makes the difference (as a result)?". This sounds strange for the practitioner who believes he knows what is good for clients and which theory he needs for helping them – everything seems to be quite ok. But the "no innocent eye"–argument undermines this certainty, because it means that he is imprisoned in his own thinking and in danger of becoming self–referential. The entry of social work science with it rigorous rational reasoning initiates a new dimension: like a GPS (global positioning system), it provides positioning and course correction. Social work stands between Scylla and Charybdis, there are rich catalogues of methods, coming from outside and mostly not "tailored" to social work, and social-work models which are pseudo-concrete, because they are applied without "what works"–consciousness in their models of change. So we cannot know whether they can provide sustaining programmes to the clients' benefit for the practitioner's actions. That is not to say that social workers do not do a good job, but social work based on social work science gains a better professional identity and, not least, the potential to be a relevant factor in the formation of future democratic societies. There are many fruitful research studies in social work, but we need more for reliably programming practice on all three levels mentioned under b). By the way, internationalisation of social work can also mean the installation of platforms for exchange of empirical research results available in all countries.

Final remark

Maybe it is somewhat unpopular to stress here the principles of science; to you, it may feel like cold rationalism. Intuitional feeling and cognition are no contradiction, on the contrary, they complement one another, we need "sense and sensibility" (the title of a novel by Jane Austen), mind and feeling, for achieving the targets in the name of our clients.

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