

Social pedagogical research in Germany

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Abstract

The number of empirical studies on German social work makes it difficult to gain a clear picture of them all. The increasing academisation of education and the expansion of study programs also reveal an increase in social work research in Germany. This article traces this development and discusses open questions. In addition, it demonstrates the importance of qualitative research, in particular for the development of professional casework. The paper proposes a systematization of German research in the field of social work and discusses this systematization based on the example of a study. Finally, the paper presents some further aspects and recent developments.

Keywords: research, social pedagogical research, qualitative research

1. Introduction

It is not easy to give a comprehensive picture of social pedagogical research in Germany. While a number of edited books are available on this topic, they systematize the field from very different perspectives. Some publications provide insights into the diversity of social

pedagogical research activities (e.g. Schweppe, Thole, 2005, Oelerich, Otto, 2011, Schimpf, Stehr, 2012, Mührel, Birgmeier, 2014), others focus on specific issues or research areas (e.g. Arbeitskreis Jugendhilfe im Wandel, 2011; Grasshoff, 2013). Yet others discuss the benefits of specific methods (e.g. Krüger, Marotzki, 2006). Finally, no academic compendium in the fields of social pedagogy can do without an article on social pedagogical research (e.g. Jakob, 2012; Schefold 2012; Sommerfeld, 2011).

Using different approaches, most of these publications are centered around two main aspects: first, a discussion of the values and objectives of empirical research in social work with regard to the disciplinary and professional discourse and second, the systemization of the confusing research landscape. As academic social pedagogy in Germany is striving to achieve an empirical foundation of disciplinary knowledge, the required quantity and quality of research and its influence on theory formation are subjects of widespread discussion. In addition, research is seen as an essential condition for the further development of social pedagogical practice.

In this article, we aim to give an insight into the discourse on social pedagogical research and discuss current developments and open questions. In addition, we will present our own taxonomy, which arranges the field according to the subject of research and the research questions being pursued. To illustrate our approach, we give an example of social pedagogical research in Germany which is based on one of our studies.

2. Social pedagogy as a research discipline?

We start with a brief examination of the relationship between social pedagogical research and social work research. There are different levels of discussion. First of all, the debates on the complex relationship between German social pedagogy and international social work (Walter, 2014) and recent development of an international social pedagogy movement (Schugurensky, Silver, 2013; Kessler, Evans, 2014) have to be taken into account. Secondly, there is a special discourse on the relationship between social work and social pedagogy in Germany. For many, social pedagogy is a field of professional activities (Eriksson, 2014). In this context, the relationship of social work and social pedagogy is often described as a complementary arrangement of social support and education. Social pedagogy can also be seen as the disciplinary home of social work. Social pedagogical research thus refers to social work

practice which has an important impact on the development of social work theory and methodology (Bastian, Lochner, 2016).

While other disciplines (such as sociology or psychology) carry out research within the professional field of social work, social pedagogical research claims to be based on its own, independent disciplinary framework and to have a specific logical and professional way of interpreting and analysing social work. Therefore, Thole (2012) insists on making a distinction between social pedagogical research, research in the field of social work which has its roots in other scientific disciplines, and research which has its roots in social pedagogy but does not focus on social pedagogical questions alone. When other disciplines study social work, he speaks about “import research”. The counterpart then is “export research”, which means that social pedagogical researchers pursue external questions.

Social pedagogical research in Germany has developed considerably in the last 20 years. In 2001, in the second edition of the Handbook on Social Work / Social Pedagogy, Lüders and Rauschenbach criticized the fact that academic research on social work was mainly carried out in students' theses, while third-party funded research was only gaining importance very slowly. For social pedagogy, Lüders and Rauschenbach concluded “that empirical research has still not been enforced as a necessary and recognized task of universities” (Lüders, Rauschenbach, 2001: 570, own translation). On the basis of this assessment, the project of social pedagogy research can certainly be described as a success story when one follows later publications. In 2005, Schweppe and Thole still noted that social pedagogical research only occurred very occasionally (see Schweppe, Thole, 2005). However, six years later Oelerich and Otto (2011) saw increasing profiling in the field, although there was still a need for more. Sommerfeld (2011) no longer questioned the increase in research activity in his revised version of the article on research in the Handbook on Social Work. The goal of establishing German “social pedagogy as a research discipline” (Schweppe, Thole, 2005) finally seemed to have been reached. Nevertheless, for the German discourse some questions still remain unclear: (1) the relationship and division of responsibilities between universities and universities of applied sciences, (2) the contribution of empirical research to theory building and (3) the practical relevance of social pedagogy research.

(1) While in most universities social pedagogy is a sub-discipline of educational science, social work departments are mainly located in universities of applied science. In addition

to the lack of systematic research, as mentioned above, this institutional separation leads to different research cultures, which can partly be explained by the different traditions of social work and social pedagogy. This separation is often seen in publications or in research collaborations. Both groups tend to keep to themselves in peaceful coexistence (Scherr, 2012: 284). There are rare points of contact, even though both types of research focus on the same social work practice.

- (2) The connection between theoretical work and empirical research is a fundamental question of the academic discourse. Simple models, such as the “wheel of science”, shaped by a positivistic image of science (see Wallace, 1972), are coming under increasing criticism. The complexity of the relationship between theoretical and empirical work has been demonstrated (Joas, Knöbl, 2011) and the positivistic approach exposed as a construction of modernity. Science studies (see Latour, Woolgar, 1979) and Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2006, 2008) played a key role in the latter. These analyses, however, do not absolve researchers from the task of mediating between social pedagogical research and theoretical work. In this regard, Sommerfeld notes that many theories are not saturated with research, and that current debates are still conducted with little focus on research (Sommerfeld, 2011).
- (3) The most controversial question might be the practical relevance of social pedagogical research. A systematic integration of empirical results into practice is rare, not only in basic research, but also in a large number of model evaluations. The critique of “research without resonance” quoted by Lüders and Rauschenbach (2001: 573) fifteen years ago, still seems to be valid. However, the possibility of a direct transfer, as proposed in the concept of evidence-based social work, in which only those interventions are valid whose outcome has been proven by rigorous studies, is discussed rather controversially in Germany (Albus, Ziegler, 2012; Otto et al., 2010; Otto, 2007). One point of criticism is that the effectiveness of a professional intervention is hardly generalizable. Little changes in the implementation or adaptation of an intervention, which are unavoidable as social work is a person-related service, affect its efficacy. The same applies if the framework conditions change, e.g. the target group (Otto, Ziegler, 2005). To generalize the effectiveness of an intervention, strict, standardized criteria for interventions in social work would be needed. Professionals would have to follow some kind of manual without any variance. A life-world-oriented and case-specific procedure as suggested in

theoretical concepts of social work would no longer be possible. The contradiction is obvious and shows that the integration of research results in theoretical work and professional practice is as complex as social work practice itself. In reducing the relevance of research to questions of effectiveness, its other contributions are often overlooked. These contributions include an expanding understanding of social processes within supportive and educational relationships, systematic insights into the perspectives of clients and professionals or the disclosure of the impact of structural conditions on professional practice in social work.

3. The role of social pedagogical research in education

An examination of German-speaking social pedagogy research shows that qualitative methods are presumed to be more relevant than others when it comes to processing and answering questions in the context of social work. This is linked to the long qualitative research tradition in the discipline (Thole, Lochner, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative methods are taught and practiced in universities of applied sciences and universities as part of vocational training (Graßhoff, Schweppe, 2012). In fact, there is a close link between qualitative research and training in social work, as specific communication and observation skills are needed in both areas. This is at least one explanation for the integration of research in university teaching. Learning and applying methods is intended to improve students' understanding of the subject and help them critically assess research evidence (Jakob, 2012). In addition, future professionals are expected to learn “social pedagogical casuistry” at research workshops. In particular, Fritz Schütze has pinpointed the relevance of this subject and established it at the German University of Kassel: “To gain a clear view of its own actions and intricacies, social work (...) requires the foundation of a fundamentally interdisciplinary field of basic and applied social science. It must be able to identify general features of social processes in individual cases and specific features in general, and be able to make (historical and situational) specific and general statements about the collective state of social worlds and the sub-worlds in which those concerned live” (Schütze, 1993: 193, own translation).

3.1 Attempt to systematize the research landscape

In the following, we briefly introduce our proposal for a new taxonomy to social pedagogical research: a kind of map, which places the most important approaches to social pedagogy research in five categories (Bastian, Lochner, 2016). These categories are by no means comprehensive and many research projects cannot be clearly assigned (as illustrated by the

example in the next section). However, it was not our goal to overcome ambiguity, but rather to develop a taxonomy which is oriented towards the areas and central foci of social pedagogical research.

- (1) Social conditions of social work: Social work is closely linked to social conditions. On the one hand, social work can be seen as a product of social conditions. On the other hand, the social context is a reference for critical social pedagogical perspectives. Social work carries out contracts for the welfare state and is a constitutive part of it; it both implements and resists the welfare state's laws. It is part of the discourses on domination and inequality, on social participation and exclusion, and on self-determination and social problems. Examining the social conditions of social work as a subject of research means focusing on social pedagogical settings and professionals' actions as part of the discourse with the aim of relating them to comprehensive social transformation processes.
- (2) Social work organizations: Organizations are the context in which social work is provided. They are interconnected with professionals who interact with clients directly. They can be understood as a structural framework that shapes professional action not only in an enabling, yet limiting sense, but also as a continuous process expressed in professionals' routine actions. Organizational research enables an examination of the relationship between actors, processes and institutions. It aims to reveal and contextualize supposedly self-evident features and aims to sharpen the outline of social work organizations.
- (3) Actors in social work: Social work is a person-related service. The shape and content of social pedagogical interventions are mainly formed by the interaction of professionals and clients. Furthermore, political, scientific or civil society actors can have impacts on social work. Accordingly, there seems to be little dispute on whether to explicitly pay attention to the actors in social pedagogical fields. Investigating their performance and subjective perspectives in order to learn about the conditions and practices of social work is obviously highly relevant. In this context, emphasis should be placed on the perspective of the clients and their involvement in the production of social pedagogy intervention and institutions.

- (4) Professional practice: Another possible focus of social pedagogical research is on (inter)actions in social pedagogical practice. Following theories of professionalism, specific features of social pedagogical practice can be investigated. The main question is: What makes social work practice professional? Following Rawls (2008: 714), who claims that “every situation has its own essential contingencies” which have to be taken into account, to gain a real insight into a place of work, we suggest not an evaluation-orientated approach but rather an action-oriented approach, following the methodological considerations of theories of practice. In this way, the features of professional practice are revealed and can be reflected upon.
- (5) Outcomes of social work: State-funded interventions in social work always include a promise of efficacy. Proof of their effect is increasingly being demanded, not only from politics. In Germany in particular, the question of what social work should actually achieve and how goals such as autonomization or well-being can be operationalized is somewhat controversial. There are no rigorously conducted randomized controlled trials in Germany. The few impact studies are more or less experimental studies that take into account context–mechanism–outcome configurations (Pawson, Tilley, 1997). As a result, factors such as the working relationship between the professional and the addressee weigh more heavily than in US studies.

3.2 Understanding and counseling of asylum seekers: an example of social pedagogical research

In our edited book (Bastian, Lochner, 2018), various contributing authors describe illustrative examples from their own research in the categories presented above. Notably, it also shows the different ways in which research is conducted in these areas, with different questions and research methods. The example below is intended to demonstrate that social pedagogy research studies often focus on several areas at the same time.

The study deals with the field of social work with refugees (Lochner, Bastian, 2018). It examines both the difficulties of refugees' living situation in Germany and their support settings. It analyzes on the one hand interviews with an asylum seeker (1) and on the other hand ethnographic field notes from independent asylum counseling for young refugees (2). The following sections are a brief extract of the study, without any extensive theoretical considerations.

- (1) The interview is about the case history of Mr. M. He comes from Afghanistan and has lived in Germany for the past two years at the time of the interview. He has not received a notification regarding his asylum procedure. In his biographical interview he shares the stages of his life and especially his escape. The interview is characterized by pain and life-threatening problems. In addition to many other issues, five problems are described, which show how much he perceives his own situation as determined by others. The problems that arise are of a very varied nature: administrative problems, health problems, housing, access to the formal education system and employment prospects. All these problems show that Mr. M. has no control over the issues that are important to him. He cannot take his destiny into his own hands. Most of it – independence, self-determination and a more successful everyday life (German: “gelingenderer Alltag”, a term introduced by Thiersch, 1992) – is denied because of his uncertain residency status or because of his age, i.e. for legal, formal reasons. Not only the needs, but also the solutions are obvious: he wants to go to school, work, live in his own home, but most of all, he wants to live his life in a self-determined manner. The case shows how much social work is paralyzed by the contradictory demands of its own mandate and by German law on foreign nationals (Müller, Dittmann, Brinks, 2014).
- (2) What this may mean for the practical performance of social work with refugees is revealed in the second part of the study, about asylum counseling at a non-governmental social welfare organization. The counseling serves as preparation for the asylum procedure, which is mainly based on interviews at the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (German: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF). The results of participant observation show how the social workers bring the refugees into line. The preparation process looks more like training than counseling. Thus, asylum seekers are advised to describe their experiences of violence and persecution in a particularly drastic and detailed manner. This specific form of presentation is then repeatedly practiced together. Based on the BAMF questionnaire, answers to specific questions are more or less provided by the experts. Furthermore, precise instructions are given on what can be said and what should be kept secret. The point is not for the clients to address and work on their own problems within the scope of the counseling. Rather, the focus is on telling the events and reasons for the flight in the “right” way. This training can be interpreted as a reproduction of the hegemonic and state-legitimated discourse on good and correct reasons for seeking asylum, as reflected in the German asylum

legislation. On the other hand, the training aspect of the advice and the meticulous preparation of the addressee have a subversive character. Through their lack of interest in the “truth” and their help in the best possible staging of history, the advice itself is immune to definitions of legitimate asylum reasons. It presents itself as an entity that basically wants to offer everyone the best opportunities to achieve a positive outcome in the asylum procedure. The consultants distance themselves from the state-mandated asylum procedure, despite their own state mandate. Despite the difficulty described above of enabling successful everyday life to take place, the professionals find ways of doing adequate social work within a narrow framework.

4. Conclusion

The study briefly outlined here shows the interconnection between the categories. It also shows the range of possible approaches within a single social pedagogical study. *The social conditions* and the discourse on flight and integration play a major role in classifying the results described here and interpreting them appropriately. Professionals in social work have to act under these conditions and legal requirements. Only through this contextual knowledge can the counseling center's approach be understood. At the same time, knowledge is provided about refugees as clients of social work, or more precisely about client constructions. Also, the professionals play an important role as *actors* in social situations. The counselling situation can be understood and investigated as professional *practice* within *organizational* structures. Ultimately, but maybe less obviously, it is possible to discuss the effect of social pedagogical interventions based on this example: After all, in working with refugees, i.e. with people who may not even be allowed to stay in Germany, questions arise of what the outcome of social work interventions can and should be.

This ambiguity in the assignment shows how social pedagogical research can cover a wide range of topics within a single research project. In this respect, the categories shown here are a possible means of systematization, but the research landscape itself is so diverse that it is difficult to assign individual projects to one category. Nevertheless, we think the classification adds value, as it shows at least the most important strands and interests.

Considering the various aspects discussed, one can conclude that social pedagogical research is still a work in process. The questions it addresses come partly from the discipline and profession themselves, partly from political programs or social discourses. The balancing act

between the approach of social issues at an early stage and the preservation of political independence is one of the biggest challenges the discipline faces. Additionally, to date, research has always been open to new approaches, and followed different “fashions” and turns, thus leading to a diverse research landscape. For example, in the categories discussed, studies can be found based on the perspectives of spatial theory (Dirks, Kessler, 2012), materiality theory (Bastian, 2017) or an inter- and transnational viewpoint (Schröder, Schweppe, 2011). In summary, much progress has been made. However, two questions remain. First, we still have to discuss what role research can and will play in the discipline of social pedagogy, in international discourse and in the further development of theory formation and practice. Secondly, it is an open question whether a comprehensive research culture or rather a lively scientific dialogue, which respects the complexity and ambiguity of social pedagogical research, should be the goal of the discourse.

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