Benedikt Hopmann

ORCID: 0000-0001-8058-0217
University of Siegen

Caroline Schmitt

ORCID: 0000-0002-0136-0441
University of Klagenfurt

Matthias D. Witte

ORCID: 0000-0002-2764-1399
Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz

Introduction. Social Work in the D-A-CH Region

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Abstract

Article is describing development of social work in D-A-CH region (Germany, Austria and Switzerland), it growth and state of interest. It mention the ever-increasing social problems in Europe as well as some of possible solutions of mentioned ones. It underline overall social importance of social work and present some of national and international social work organizations.

Keywords

Social work, D-A-CH region, Germany, Austria, Switzerland

In Germany (D), Austria (A) and Switzerland (CH), social work has developed in close interaction with welfare state structures (Schmid, 2018; Esping-Andersen, 1990). It is embedded in social legislation, but must always be more than a state service provider. Its task is to prevent and overcome social exclusion, to empower people to participate and be autonomous, to exert an influence on inclusion and to critically examine developments within the state such as the economisation of the social or the exacerbation of social inequalities. In this understanding, Social Work has the responsibility to intervene in social reality and pursue its mission in that context.

In this special issue, we aim to bring Social Work perspectives from the D-A--CH region into an exchange and at the same time show that although Social Work

is shaped by the nation state in many countries, its mission is not limited by national borders. In view of global problems such as war, climate change and poverty, Social Work is called upon to think beyond national borders even more than in the past and to create interregional and international spaces for dialogue and action.

Social work in and beyond Europe

Europe is characterised by a plurality of nation states, languages and cultural traditions. It is a diverse space. At the same time, interconnectedness between nation states is increasing at a rapid pace in Europe. This complexity not only opens up opportunities, but is also a great challenge for Social Work practice and theory. More than ever, the goal is for social workers to act and co-operate on a pan-European level, working together for a social, open and just Europe. Crises in the European institutions, the lack of a European social policy and the development of nationalist dynamics have changed the European project. The social distortions in the European Union and the erosion of European unity are unmistakable. The European project is in danger of failing due to economic aspects being prioritised and nationalist border regimes being created (Yıldız, 2018, p. 62) instead of a community that is based on the idea of social justice and human rights (Lorenz, 2019, p. 77).

This situation once again requires European politics and Social Work to address the ever-increasing social problems in Europe and to develop solutions (Csoba et al., 2014): after all, exclusion, poverty, refugee migration, racism, discrimination and much more do not stop at national borders. They require European and international regulations and transformation.

Looking back, Social Work in Europe was already a topic of debate in the past. At the beginning of the 20th century, pioneers of Social Work such as Alice Salomon and social workers in other countries were involved in close professional dialogue and networked at international conferences. In view of the worsening problems not just in Europe but throughout the world, it is becoming increasingly important to build on these traditions in Social Work. This does not necessarily require a clearly defined subject area and social workers with a shared research profile. It is also about taking part in the heterogeneous debates found in Social Work and giving due consideration to regional and geographical specificities. The Europeanisation of Social Work, understood as networking, discussion and theory building taking place among nations, is increasingly being debated (Lorenz, 2006, 2011; see the special issue of the journal *Social Work & Society*, *19*(1), 2021 dealing with the question: "Is Out-of-Home Care in a Crisis?" Perspectives on Child and Youth Welfare Systems in northern Europe and Germany). Seen from this angle, Social

Work in Europe can be described in the context of international Social Work, and at the same time has local and regional connections. As a social service, it has become a component of the local social infrastructure in many countries and is only sustainable if it understands itself as international and decolonial (Erath, 2011).

In this context, it is crucial that Social Work does not stop at the issues that are relevant in Europe, and is open for decolonial action. This includes, for example, the question of how to deal with refugees at Europe's external borders, with racism and the question of whether to enter into reconciliation processes to assuage colonial guilt (Kourabas, 2021). Noyoo and Kleibl (2020) point out that if Social Work wants to develop in the face of problematic global situations, the field must recognise discourses around the world and pick up on them in the concepts it employs. Exclusively 'Western' or European understandings of Social Work (Noyoo & Kleibl, 2020, p. 6) would fall short, could even be dangerous, and would run the risk of undermining and preventing the recognition of indigenous knowledge, indigenous Social Work and the indigenisation of Social Work practice. Instead, what is needed is a Social Work without boundaries that promotes discussion on and joint solution-finding for the major problems of our time using the knowledge amassed globally by the profession and discipline (Sajid et al., 2020).

This special issue addresses the challenges outlined above. It systematically describes Social Work in the D-A-CH region before examining perspectives that think beyond Europe.

Social work – a growing professional field in the D-A-CH region

Looking at the statistical data[1], one thing is clear in Germany, Austria and Switzerland: in quantitative terms, Social Work is a professional field that is in demand and constantly growing. Statistical surveys on the occupational field of Social Work cannot be compared one-to-one across countries. In some cases, training courses and university degrees in Social Work are combined and grouped together with teaching activities. The academic and training courses are also not identical from one country to the next. Despite this difficulty, we undertake a statistical overview that at least reveals a common direction in all three countries: social professions are constantly in demand, and that tendency is increasing in the entire D-A-CH region.

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[1] The authors would like to thank Elisabeth Engberding for her dedicated support in researching the statistics cited.

In Germany, according to data from the Federal Employment Agency, the number of employees in the sector of education, Social Work and curative education care rose continuously from 2016 to 2020 from around 1.37 million to 1.59 million (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2020). In the statistics, the sector of "education, Social Work and curative education care" is subdivided into employees in the field of "education and teaching", "social services (excluding care homes)", "homes (excluding rest homes)", "public administration, social insurance" and "interest groups, church groups and other associations". In all these areas, there has been a steady increase in the number of employees (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2020).

For Austria, the labour market statistics in the field of "education and training" and in the field of "health and Social Work" also show an increase for the research period from 2014 to 2020. In 2014, the number of persons employed in the field of "education and teaching" was 272,300 (Statistik Austria, 2019, p. 41). It increased slightly to 289,200 employees by 2020 (Statistik Austria, 2020). In the field of "health and Social Work", there is a clear upward trend from 367,700 employees in 2014 (Statistik Austria, 2019, p. 41) to 466,400 employees in 2020 (Statistik Austria, 2020).

Statistics for Switzerland also illustrate that the field of Social Work continues to grow. According to a structural survey by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, the number of people employed in the "professions of care and education" has grown from 5,394 in 1970 to 116,847 in 2016. There are no signs of an end to this growth (Avenir Social, 2018, p. 23).

Overall social importance

While the number of employees in the field grows, Social Work continues to suffer from a lack of recognition within society compared to professions such as medicine or psychology. In the public perception, the fact that the field is growing does not seem to automatically imply that its importance is increasing for society as a whole. At the same time, rising employment figures in this field do not necessarily correlate with actual staffing needs in the fields of Social Work. As staffing ratios are defined according to cost criteria, there is a mismatch between needs and staffing ratios in health-related Social Work in care facilities for the elderly or other residential contexts. In addition, Social Work professionals in many countries are paid comparatively low wages, which also indicates how society values the field (for child and youth welfare in Germany, see Böllert, 2019, p. 235).

The thesis that there is a lack of social reputation is supported with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the expertise of virologists and economists is in particular demand in expert committees on pandemic management,

while experts from the field of Social Work (or related disciplines) are less in view. This is despite the fact that, since the outbreak of the pandemic, it has become clear that Covid-19 is not only a medical crisis, but also a drastic social and ecological crisis that exposes and exacerbates social inequalities around the world (Lutz et al., 2021).

National and international Social Work associations

As Social Work wants to strengthen its position as a discipline and profession, a historical professional debate is once again taking place on how Social Work is organised in associations, committees and professional societies. As editors, we would like to draw attention to the German Professional Association for Social Work (DBSH), the Austrian Professional Association for Social Work (OBDS) and the Social Work professional association avenir social in Switzerland, as well as the many other associations in the D-A-CH region. They all bring together professional expertise in one place and represent the professional policy agenda of Social Work in public.

In Germany, the scientific society, which is mainly driven by members of universities, is the German Society for Educational Science (DGfE) with its Commission for Social Pedagogy. In Austria, Social Pedagogy is part of the Austrian Society for Research and Development in Education (ÖFEB). In Switzerland, there is a working group for Research on Social Pedagogy at the Swiss Society for Educational Research (SGBF).

The German Society for Social Work (DGSA), the Austrian Society for Social Work (OGSA) and the Swiss Society for Social Work (SGSA), which are mainly driven by members at universities of applied sciences, are already explicitly using the potential of the D-A-CH region for professional dialogue crossing national borders. In 2021, they organised a trinational conference[2] on the topic of "European Society(ies) between Cohesion and Division".

At the international level, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) each form an umbrella association for Social Work. These organisations work closely with regional associations around the world. They all have their origins in the first International Conference on Social Work, which took place in Paris in 1928 (Straub, 2016, p. 15), and glob-

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[2] See the call for papers at https://www.ogsa.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/DGSAOGSASG-SA.pdf [accessed: 21.06.2023].

ally advocate a Social Work that is based on human rights, social justice and inclusion, without neglecting indigenous knowledge and local specificities.

Demands for international exchange have been made in the education system (Friesenhahn & Thimmel, 2019). Examples include programmes such as ERASMUS (higher education), Erasmus Mundus (international higher education), Comenius (school education), Leonardo da Vinci (vocational education and training), Grundtvig (adult education) and YOUTH IN ACTION (youth education). However, there are still major inequalities regarding who is eligible for these programmes, who is informed about them and who is encouraged to engage in international exchanges. Studies indicate that international exchange projects are mainly a middle- and upper-class project and that marginalised young people need to be taken into account more (Herz et al., 2018). In this context, and with regard to global programmes, the question of how young people from countries of the Global South can have equal opportunities for global mobility is significant, meaning that they are also considered in major efforts to improve education and internationalisation.

Conclusion and outlook for the contributions in the issue

As the introduction shows, the subject of this issue is permeated by ambivalence. This extends from nationalism and racism in Europe and the world on the one hand, and much-vaunted internationalisation efforts – for example in the field of education – on the other. Under conditions of nationalism, racism and major global challenges in dealing with war, violence, poverty and the climate crisis, this issue aims to help bring together the fields of Social Work theory and practice in the D-A-CH region, to make them more visible on an international level and to promote dialogue across national borders. This would mean that the constantly growing field of professional Social Work is accompanied by a growing recognition of social workers' activities by society as a whole, in Europe and beyond.

The authors of foreign articles in this issue of journal study Social Work in Germany (*see the contribution by Hopmann, Schmitt & Witte*), Austria (*see the contribution by Sting*) and Switzerland (*see the contribution by Mörgen & Vogel*). Another contribution explicitly addresses the fields of action and tasks of international, decolonial Social Work (*see the contribution by Neureither, Kleibl & Lutz*). All the pieces have a similar structure: an introduction is followed by an examination of the history of Social Work in Germany, Austria or Switzerland, or the history of international Social Work. Working methods, organisational structures and current debates are then dealt with in greater depth, followed by the conclusion.

We wish you a stimulating read and hope you gain new insights and ideas for your engagement with Social Work in the D-A-CH region and beyond!

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