



EUSW **European Platform for
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Respecting Diversity and Avoiding Exclusion All equal – all different

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Social Work in an Intercultural Context – How to Embrace Diversity to Promote Social Cohesion

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1. Introduction

I would like to present some ideas with regard to two developments which have an enormous impact on the practice of social work and which play at the same time a important role in scientific social work discourses.

These two topics contain and touch the crucial characteristics of social work that means: the organisation and structure of social work, its concepts and methods as well as its values.

In addition these two topics demonstrate very clearly, that social work, its activities and concepts is not to understand without taking into account the social, cultural, and historical context in which it is situated.

The two topics are **exclusion and diversity** - and I would like to draw your attention to the perspective to look at these topics not separately but bring these two big issues together.

Social work is conscious of the fact, that it is nowadays always international and intercultural. And that means, to keep in mind that we have to deal with people with different cultural backgrounds and orientations. Cultural differences, living conditions and social discrimination must be seen together.

And then we have to ask what are the tasks, challenges and problems for social work following out from this perspective.

2. The understanding of social work

There is a broad, worldwide understanding that one of the main tasks of social work is to avoid exclusion and respect human beings. Based on respect and dignity of all people social work should promote the human rights and the rights to individual self-determination and participation and integration in society. Social workers should challenge discrimination, and work to overcome social exclusion.

These tasks are more and more confronted with social and political developments (globalisation and migration, neo-liberal politics and cuts of social benefits, de-institutionalisation and strengthening of so-called self-responsibility) which have an enormous impact concerning the relation between social policy, social welfare structures, social services delivery and the role of social work professionals.

As a part of the social welfare system social work is involved in the global process and is not able to evade these issues. From my point of view politics has the power to set the framework (aims, laws Resources) for social work and not vice versa. The effort of social work to re-frame the "the social" according to the given conditions is, self evidently, not always achieved.

The big issues like globalisation and modernisation in the meantime have a stable place in social work discourses. This is not by accident because it is not possible to think on social work without looking at the comprehensive framework in which social work is situated. In Europe the industrialisation in the 19th, 20th century led in nearly all European states to a growing economy and these led to the fact that nation states were able to build up welfare systems.

A similar development we can see in these days in developing countries in East Asia. China is extending education and health care coverage to the rural countryside, Thailand has introduced a universal program for health care provision and there seems to be a clear focus on public investment in social affairs.

Social welfare system in its traditional form has been oriented towards a traditional men dominated working industrialized society which does not longer exist.

Traditionally the welfare state had the role to compensate social risks caused by the capitalistic system.

3. Recent developments and traditional views

Nowadays it seems that investments in the social sphere, the strengthening of the social dimension of a society are regarded as a risk for the national economy: Comprehensive security systems endanger the economic well-being because of the high working costs for the employees. These ideology makes us to testimonies of a radical reconstruction of welfare systems throughout Europe.

“Neo-liberal policies aim at transferring public responsibilities as far as possible to the private sector and re-define thereby the nature of the relationship between private and public responsibilities that had given the various European welfare regimes their distinct character” states Walter Lorenz

The more social work is being privatised the more the family resources comes to the fore – and thereby differences and inequality. In addition to social and political and economic factors cultural based factors at the latest now have to be taken into account. : We have to focus on the relationship of socio-political versus cultural factors in determining the course and the outline of welfare states policies in different welfare states .

The restructuring of the modern welfare state is evident and it seems that social work is forced just to follow these developments without having the chance, to bring in its perspectives, objectives and values. The understanding of the “Social” becomes uncertain and with that the legitimacy and mandate of social work and social services.

A traditional implication of the welfare state is to guarantee welfare, to reduce risks and to improve social cohesion by supporting better livings condition especially for working class people.

To summarize: It is the question and the answer how to create solidarity in a society and how to ensure access and guarantee **inclusion** and participation in the society. Finally this lead to the question whether a inclusive society a society in which the border between WE and the OTHERS is overcome and everyone has the right and access to resources and power is possible at all. ?

For a long time the focus of welfare was on financial aspects, on materially resources . The predominant means of welfare was highly re-distributive and that seemed to be the way to establish a justice society. Looking at the reality we have to honest and to state: Social work has not reached this ambitious objectives. Poverty and exclusion, discrimination and racism are visible in all European societies. And that does not fit in the self image of social work and does not meet the reality

In the words of Walter Lorenz:

“The welfare consensus after the Second World War had been built on the myth that new social policies has eliminated structural poverty so that those individuals and families still not able to cope were cast in the light of people who had >problems of adjustment> who required treatment or education in order to be able to fully participate in society. And in analogy of the treatment of those who came to the

attention of educational and welfare services those members of recently arrived migrant groups.....were also regarded as in need of help with their ability to adjust”

The overall objectives were: >Levelling differences< and >bringing newcomers up to standards<. In all these social practices the normality of the national standards remained unquestioned or became affirmed even more strongly.

Nowadays new developments are influencing the political, economical and social dimension of the society. The framework of the “Social” is not longer the national state, but has global dimensions and the idea that each society /state has a homogenous population belongs definitely to the past.

Diversity instead of uniqueness is determining our lives and thereby it is more and more difficult to establish and maintain social cohesion.

Social cohesion exists if a group of people, a society has common aims and objectives, has an idea how to overcome obstacles and share basic values. This perspective refers to a cultural homogeneous society, in which social welfare systems were able to reduce social risks and to balance living conditions by social security systems, social services and social work used to be the actor which was able and responsible to deliver the adequate services.

In modern, multi-ethnic societies the shared value base, the common aim is not longer existing (if it was at all). We must recognize that the concept of homogeneity belongs to the past and has to be replaced by the concept of diversity .

This shift should include not only a European perspective but also Europe as an entity.

A description of what Europe is, is not possible without underpinning the point of its diversity. There is not a unity, neither politically nor in a economic, social or cultural way. The sense of identity, of being a European is different in Poland and in England. Having breakfast mean something different in Paris, Berlin and Riga. Diversity in many aspects of human life, of educational policies and needs is the hallmark of Europe.

4. Diversity Management

The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. In the light of the Amsterdam treaty in which the anti-discrimination law was laid down in a lot of European States the term diversity is now used. This happens in different fields of practice and social workers are using various competencies like counselling, network building, coaching, planning and coordinating, and evaluation in order to achieve the overall aims. They are following the aim of promoting human dignity and social justice in governmental structures as well as in voluntary organisations.

Diversity can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. For social work it is important to look at differences within a given

multi-ethnic population, to refer to the importance of understanding and appreciating the cultural differences between groups and refers to understanding how different groups exist in a hierarchy of inequality in terms of power, privilege, and wealth. The religious dimension is since a few years an very important issues in this context.

In former times social work was often located between help and control.

Now social work is sometimes seen as intermediate actor, as a >social service broker <. The task is then more to support a dialog between different (power) groups in the society than to organize resistance against the oppressive state policy.

In former times, in traditional images of the society, differences used to be seen as deviant , often accompanied by a pejorative connotation . Nowadays with the concept of diversity we underline , that the diversity of life perspectives , the plurality of world views , weltanschauungen and differences in the individual life worlds can be regarded as constitutive and constructive elements for the development of the society. Diversity and plurality are not longer merely regarded as a social threat but as an enrichment.

The conceptual focus is now on dealing with differences and discrimination. It makes sense to divide discrimination

- i) political and legal inequality
- ii) socio-economical inequality
- iii) cultural discrimination.

5. Acknowledgement and inclusion

As a consequence of neo-liberal welfare policies and the >ethnecitisation< of social relations the concept of dealing and managing diversity is seen as able to cope with different developments to find solutions for a more just community and society.

Diversity is based on the differences and equality of human beings. The basic philosophy is to acknowledge different characteristics and to interpret differences as positive resources. Although in all concepts of diversity acknowledgment and valuing of diversity is a core issue there are remarkable differences in concerned perspectives. Diversity as a concept is used in political and the economical sector (in enterprises etc) and since some years in social sciences and humanities.

As a management approach it is centered around

- Acknowledgment of differences
- Recognizing and valuing of differences
- Using (exploiting) differences as a resource
- Promotion of openness and diversity

In social sciences diversity concepts are often located in the context of intercultural work .

In intercultural contexts two main strains have been developed over the last 2 or 3 decades:

- a) the cultural based approach which aims at mutual relationships, dialog between cultures and mutual understanding supported by intercultural

learning and intercultural competencies which include knowledge concerning the structure of the e.g. migration politics and the relevant actors

- b) the structural based anti-racist approach focusing on societal framework which is marked by inequality, discrimination, and hierarchy in terms of power.

These two strains are confronted with

- c) the diversity management approach which accepts diversity and differences as normality in our lives, refers to relevant differences between individuals and groups and aims at acknowledging, promoting and supporting diversity in order to see it as a resource for the development of the society and “to make use and profit” out of it.

According to Pincus there are at least four ways that social scientist use the concept of diversity.

- **Counting diversity** refers to empirically enumeration differences within a given population
- **Culture diversity**... refers to the importance of understanding and appreciating the cultural differences between groups
- **Good for business diversity** refers to the arguments that businesses will be more profitable, and government agencies and not-for-profit corporations will be more efficient, with diverse labor forces .
- **Conflict diversity** refers to understanding how different groups exist in a hierarchy of inequality in terms of power, privilege, and wealth.

6. Implications for social work

This view has implications for social work.

In social work diversity can not be regarded just as a matter of empirical facts, but we have to keep in mind that differences are connected with social power and social exclusion.

The discourse on power, exclusion and discrimination belongs to the fundamentals of social work which is at the same time linked with certain values.

As an example I refer to a statement of the Scottish Executive Education Department concerning the role of social workers in the 21st century.

„There is a wide agreement about the basic values of social work. Based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, social work should promote the rights to self-determination and participation in society. Social workers should challenge discrimination, recognise diversity and work to overcome social exclusion. These values are substantially constant across different societies and throughout the history of social work”.

To summarize:

With the concept of diversity the relation between inside and outside in a society , between inclusion and exclusion, between discrimination and social cohesion has to be re-defined .

Questions of belonging and of cohesion have to be discussed and clarified in a new light. Clear concepts of e.g. cultural belonging are not longer to guarantee.

Personal developments of transitions emerge and individuals refer at the same time to different cultural contexts and the result is defined as **hybridism** cultural manifold belonging. That underlines also that identity is not longer a clear

determination but differs from situation to situation. Identity is not longer seen as a stable character of a person but as a process in which the result can differ. It becomes a matter of negotiation.

Diversity refers not only on people from other cultures

The acceptance of diversity concepts has as an implication the changed relationship with strangeness in general e.g. with life-concepts, behavior which seems to be deviant or strange at least as not part of the cultural mainstream.

According B Müller social work came into being because of the >strange live-concepts< of poor, marginalized, handicapped people. Social work had always the task to adjust people, to help people not to be different.

The recent discourse on diversity and the wider perspective for social work is that diversity not just refers to differences which can be seen as a result of existing multi-cultural societies or as results from different gender positions, but it refers also to strangeness in general, it refers to differences in life-styles, age, discrimination and handicaps

This approach is very adequate for social work in general.

The crucial value is acknowledgment which guarantees according the German philosopher Honneth individuals a positive self concept.

Acknowledgment can have different perspectives and we can link it with

- emotional acknowledgment (love)
- legal acknowledgment (equal rights)
- mutual acknowledgment between socio-cultural different persons (solidarity).

7. Perspectives

Social work has been always seen as an actor which fights for equality and solidarity, for human dignity and as an anti-oppressive profession: as an actor which guarantees social integration and social cohesion.

The >social<, respectively the social cohesion is a factor which decides on the quality of life in a society. The social policy of the welfare states, their programmes against the risks like illness, unemployment, accidents and poverty can be regarded as an investment in the well-being of the society and its citizens based on the values of solidarity and social justice.

The crucial question is: Which direction the reform of welfare systems and social work will follow. What will be the main focus? How it can be financed? What will be the future structure of welfare and the role of social work? In any case social workers need the information and knowledge about the complex framework.

Although social work as a sciences and as an academic discipline, has reached a high level of research competencies, a solid knowledge base and a strong ethical foundation we must keep in mind that as a professions social work is an dependent and not an autonomous actor.

Social work is regulated by the state and has so far to follow given guidelines-even if a high percentage of social workers are employed by non-statutory institutions or NGOs. Social workers act embedded in an institutional context.

In its self image social work is a agent of social changed a change towards solidarity and social justice. The described development makes clear that social work is in terms of political power relatively weak . The widening of social profession and the fact that new social professions emerge which do not share necessarily the ethical basis of social work can be seen as a process of de-construction.

Social work is loosing its profile and faced with the power of economy its rather unclear which competencies its has to construct a better society.

That means social worker will work under precarious conditions. Permanent jobs are phase-out models and permanent changes in the compositions of working teams, permanent new demands and challenges will characterize the working agenda . The incorporation of economic issues and instruments with the overall aim of reducing costs will led to a higher and even more stressful working load. And that means also that social work is required to demonstrate or what it is needed and which problems can it solve and with which competencies it can support people in certain living conditions.

Social work has been always seen as an human-rights-profession - but how can social work defend human rights if it itself is in a weak position? A critical actor needs an autonomy in order to put forward critique.

At least social works remain a moral actor, its political function is than to analyse and to criticize societal processes which can be considered as an destruction of the existing value basis. This is not easy and certainly less ambitious than the traditional understanding of social work as an agent of change. But this can be better than to follow idealised aims one can never reach.

I think social work should avoid which one could call the "Mr.- Bean Effect".

Mr. Bean is a funny person because with the view to do always the right things, to follow the easiest and common way to solve problems and misunderstanding in a very simple and practical way by making pretence to follow the common sense , he put himself in very funny and sometimes in grotesque situations. This is funny because normally Mr. Bean acts in daily life situation and everybody knows what is wrong with it. Would he act in more important settings his behaviour could be described as tragic at least as tragicomedy.

Social work should in contrast to this follow its professional basis which is to follow the insight that not all social problems can be solved by social work.

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