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## **SOCIAL WORK IN GERMANY – SELECTED ISSUES**

### **Abstract**

Social work in Germany became a topic in the 19th century when the leading principles of the welfare system were introduced by the state. Today social workers are essential for the welfare state by working with clients and organizing social care in a variety of institutions run by the state or on a private basis. In their work with clients social workers fulfil their roles by prevention, closeness to everyday life, decentralization and integration. Social workers are educated at universities and universities of applied sciences. According to social workers working conditions are not the best but with an increasing staff shortage they are in a good position to negotiate better working conditions with their employers.

**Keywords:** Social work, Germany, working conditions, education

### Foundations of the social system in Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany is formed by sixteen states (*Bundesländer*). On the federal level legislative structures are the *Bundestag* (parliament of directly elected representatives) and *Bundesrat* with the representatives of German *Bundesländer*. While this secures a high level of democracy it sometimes makes decisions difficult. A current example is the new system of nurse education. Although the regulations have been decided on federal level since 2017 they have to be put into practice by 2020 in the nursing schools which are mainly regulated by the *Bundesländer*. Financing the reform is still a question in August 2019 (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2019).

Today responsibilities in the social system are divided between the different governmental levels. Social security became a topic for politicians in the 19th century when the effects of the industrial revolution like crowded cities and increased pov-

erty could not be ignored any longer. After the German Empire was founded in 1871 a strong socialist movement demanded social reforms. The Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) was keen to keep more demands down and reacted by introducing the first compulsory insurances for workers. In 1883 health insurance was introduced, in 1884 accident insurance and in 1889 pension insurance (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015). The principle that the financial contributions to the insurances are shared by the workers and the employers is still applied today.

Over the next decades the compulsory insurance was extended to include more population groups, in 1927 unemployment insurance was introduced. The last insurance in this line is the 1994 based long-term care insurance (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015). With these five compulsory insurances main risks of life are regulated.

The underlying idea of the compulsory insurances is solidarity. A second idea informing the German social system is the idea of subsidiarity. Tasks that can be taken care of by a community of lower order should not be resumed by a community of higher order. The community of higher order is obliged to support the community of lower order in fulfilling its tasks independently (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2019). This means for example that social assistance which is need-based in Germany is mainly managed on the regional level. Although a person with learning disabilities has the same rights (laid down on federal level) the care provided might be very different in various *Bundesländer*. Another example is the educational system. While there is no fee to pay for your child to go to *Kindergarten* (day care centre) in Hamburg or Lower Saxony, the *Bundesland* south of Hamburg, the most northern *Bundesland* Schleswig-Holstein has the highest fees in Germany varying in the cities and municipalities causing the government of Schleswig-Holstein to limit the maximum contribution for parents (Schleswig-Holstein government, 2019).

The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity as well as the political system with its different levels of responsibilities are a challenge for some employees in social work. If they change their job from one to another part of Germany they might be obliged to learn different regulations although they are not changing their field of specialized social work.

## Social workers and their roles

Social workers are a distinct part of the workforce in Germany. They work in all kinds of places and with all kinds of people. From the historical perspective social

work has at least two roots: one is called “social pedagogy” and is rooted in youth work and the other is “social work” and derives from the care for the poor (Schilling & Klus, 2015). Although Bachelor programs in social work might have a focus on special aspects of social work the distinction between “social pedagogy” and “social work” is less important today.

Social workers are informed by theories of social work developed in Germany since the 1970s. The answers of social workers to social issues might be classified to four groups of challenges according to Rauschenbach & Züchner:

- more challenges in the development of children and young people,
- social inequalities with issues of exclusion, disintegration and social control,
- risks in individual lives and how to cope with them,
- empowerment and enhancement of capabilities (Rauschenbach & Züchner, 2016, pp. 169–170).

One well known German example of a theory is the approach of Wolfgang Thiersch (Thiersch, Köngeter & Grunwald, 2012) who puts the living environment of the client into focus. Developed in the 1970s this theoretical approach to social work has been revised and extended over the last decades taking into account the general tendencies of neoliberalism and managerialism of the 1990s and their influence on social policy in Germany. Based on the tradition of hermeneutics, critical pedagogy, phenomenology and the interactionist approach according to Thiersch the aim of social workers is to enable people to cope more successfully in their everyday lives (Thiersch et al., 2012, p. 183). The dimensions of the living environment are the following:

- The experienced time – transitions in the course of life provide special challenges. Especially youths have to cope with challenges of the openness of society – social work takes into account changes in society as well as culture of peers.
- Experienced space – if living spaces are depriving for clients social work tries to broaden them and takes into account the individual situation.
- Social connections – work with children always has to take parents into account.
- Daily coping challenges – help with structuring even small tasks in life like organizing meals in living arrangements for mentally ill people.
- Help to self help – to enable people to take decisions autonomously, help to shape one’s identity.
- Conditions of the society – because living conditions of individuals are influenced by politics social work has to work politically as well (Thiersch et al., 2012, p. 187).

According to Thiersch (Thiersch et al., 2012) social workers have to fulfil their role based on these dimensions by using a set of principles. These principles are

prevention, closeness to everyday life, decentralization and integration. The principles have to be adapted in the different fields of work. For example “prevention” has another meaning in open youth work than in social work in an institution for people with multiple disabilities.

On the one hand social workers have to fulfil their role in the interest of clients. On the other hand those interests do not always meet the interests of society or the state. This area of conflict is a continuous item in the practice of social work and therefore a main topic in the education of social workers in Germany laid down in the educational standards (Fachbereichstag Soziale Arbeit, 2016).

### Education for social workers

Social work as a trained profession has its roots in the 19th century (Schilling & Klus, 2015). Up to the 1960s training was provided in schools comparable with other schools on secondary level for the training of occupations. When in 1970 a new kind of university – the so-called universities of applied sciences – was introduced social work and social pedagogy became part of these universities providing study programs on the tertiary level. At the same time traditional universities with faculties of education started pedagogy studies and initiated a branch of social pedagogy as well (Schilling & Klus, 2015). Students graduated with the first academic degree, the German *Diplom*, after completing four years of study. When *Diplom* programs were followed by Bachelor and Master programs after the year 2000 a lot of critical discussion took place among lecturers of social work (Hill, 2012; Müller-Hermann & Becker-Lenz, 2018). The main critical point was the shortening of Bachelor programs to 3 or 3.5 years of study compared with the four years before. Another point was the more standardized syllabus of instruction which critics saw as contradictory to the professionalization of social work. Autonomous designing of the study programs by universities would be impeded. Faculties of social work rejected the underlying idea that the economy was interested in having faster qualified social workers for the labour market (Müller-Hermann & Becker-Lenz, 2018).

Private universities were less critical and started social work studies as well. Today there are about 80 sites in Germany to study social work (Fachbereichstag Soziale Arbeit, 2019). In 2017/18 about 85,000 students were enrolled in study programs of social work (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019, p. 100). Programs are provided by State universities and universities of applied sciences as well as private universities of applied sciences. The protestant and the catholic church mainly run universities of applied sciences. Bachelor graduates are offered a range of Master programs to continue their studies. In 2016 *Fachbereichstag Soziale Arbeit* (the

deans of the faculties of social work) commissioned a study to look at careers of master graduates in social work from 2010 to 2017. First results were published in 2017 (Bamberg & Hempelmann, 2017). Although only 439 graduates from 18 universities and universities of applied sciences were involved results nevertheless were a good feedback for faculties to develop their study programs. Critical points raised by the students were the following:

- a lack of contacts to potential employers during the program,
- a lack to get an overview over the different fields of social work for deciding which career path to follow after graduation,
- a lack of promotion at their individual work places after graduation,
- a lack of better pay at their jobs after graduation.

The last two concerns might be understood by the relative new concept of master graduates in the job market in German social work. Employers might have had few ideas how to use the skills of Master graduates. The first two concerns directly point to the need for faculties of social work to revise their programs.

Doctoral studies in social work are still difficult in Germany. Traditionally universities of applied sciences were not supposed to educate students for academic work or research. During the decades when the German *Diplom* was the first academic degree graduates from a university were able to advance to doctoral studies on an individual agreement with a university in a related academic field e.g. in a faculty of education, in sociology or psychology. Degree graduates from a university of applied sciences could take the same path but sometimes had to take additional exams to be accepted as doctoral students (Ehlert et al., 2017). But the status of universities of applied sciences has changed with the introduction of the Bologna process and its three levels of education. Today universities of applied sciences are more self-confident and try to be allowed to provide doctoral studies. The first *Bundesland* allowing doctoral studies at universities for applied sciences is *Hesse*. In 2017 three universities of applied sciences started the *Promotionszentrum Soziale Arbeit* (2019) as an corporately organized institute. This is the first opportunity in Germany to study social work on doctoral level and finish it with a doctoral degree in social work and not only in a related academic field.

## Working conditions for social workers

In 2017 316,000 social workers with an academic background were in employment (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019, p. 97). In addition about 60,000 employees were working with the same responsibilities but without an academic background. Unemployment is not a problem at the moment. Demographic

changes with more older people, more institutions for the care of children and an acute rise in immigration of refugees in 2015 demanded the creation of new jobs.

Social workers work at a variety of settings. Around one sixth of the social workers are in public agencies, e.g. social departments, youth departments on community or regional level and social insurance agencies (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019, p. 98). But most institutions are run by non profit agencies. Traditionally the churches are very strong in social services in Germany. For example *Deutscher Caritasverband e. V.* (2019), the agency of the catholic church, provides paid jobs for 650,000 people in 25,000 institutions. The protestant church provides 525,700 paid jobs (Diakonie Deutschland, 2019). Small privately run services complete the different employers. Most services work on a non profit level.

74% of social workers in Germany are female and 50 % work part-time (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019, p. 98). This is typical for female professions. Although qualified social workers have better working contracts than those with a low or no qualification in the field of social work it is still worth to notice that clients might miss a lack of continuity in communication and interaction (Fuchs-Rechlin, 2018). Because more and more jobs are only financed on a temporary basis a lot of jobs are temporary as well. In 2017 58% of new created jobs were on a temporary basis (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019, p. 98).

Part-time work and temporary contracts are typical for precarious work and not adequate to ensure the family income. This is a problem because compared with other professions more single mothers are working in social work (Henn, Lochner & Meiner-Teubner, 2017). No wonder that in general German social workers are not satisfied with their salaries. Salaries vary according to the working field, working experience, region and employer. While 25% of social workers have a gross income of 3,333 € per month when working 38 hours a week the lowest 25 % earn less than 2,160 €.

On the whole social workers feel stressed by their working conditions (Henn et al., 2017). Although most of them appreciate to plan their working day on their own this is affected by more working demands and more complex situations with clients. Social workers are strongly committed to their professional roles and emphasize trustful relationships with their clients but they are less committed to their employers. *Gewerkschaft Wissenschaft und Erziehung*, one of the trade unions for social workers, is asking why the wide spread dissatisfaction of social workers does not result in more political action (Henn et al., 2017).

In a time with an increased staff shortage employers are asked to provide better working conditions otherwise social workers will not hesitate to change their employers. Henn et al. (2017) point out that this might become very costly for

employers. Therefore they see it crucial that employers provide better salaries and ask social workers what they need to work within the professional standards. At the moment social workers are in a good position to negotiate better working conditions.

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## Historia pracy socjalnej w Niemczech – wybrane kwestie

### Streszczenie

Praca socjalna w Niemczech stała się tematem w XIX wieku, kiedy państwo wprowadziło nowe zasady systemu opieki społecznej. Obecnie pracownicy



socjalni są niezbędni dla istnienia państwa opiekuńczego. Pracują z klientami organizując opiekę społeczną w różnych instytucjach, prowadzonych przez państwo lub sektor prywatny. Pracownicy socjalni kształcą się na uniwersytetach i uniwersytetach nauk stosowanych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** praca socjalna, Niemcy, warunki pracy, edukacja