Fields of practice in social work: interim appraisal of a dynamic development

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Abstract
In Germany, social work has long been more than what it was originally intended to be; it is more than an emergency support provided outside the school and family. Its fields of practice have changed over time, and analysis of those historical changes show that social work has become a constituent part of the welfare state’s basic provisions and developed a pool of professional knowledge, while its practitioners have spread into an ever more specialised array of fields. Social work has normalised into a service which modern societies need for their development and integration. As the welfare state developed its modern influence, occupations in the social sector have become part of the social infrastructure, even if market mechanisms and competition are gradually exerting greater influence in those fields of practice. However, in times of scarcity and global change, the fields of social work practice also face other challenges.

Keywords: social work, Germany, fields of practice, welfare state, global changes

1. Introduction
Essentially, social work relates to the pedagogically mediated relationship between society and free, self-sufficient individuals. Social work has found its place in society, and is required to deal with the thorny social problems arising through interaction between society, its institutions and individuals (Hamburger, 2008). To be more precise, on one hand there is a society that disrupts, hampers or prevents human life and human development. On the other hand, a
wide range of efforts are made within the fields of social work practice, in the best interests of society, to support and promote that development among its clients by having social work professionals, trained at vocational schools or at university, carrying out their work based on instructional methodology. At the same time, there is an awareness that people only act autonomously under certain conditions, and are tied to existing social, cultural and personal conditions and circumstances (Heiner, 2004).

In Germany, the word *Handeln* ("taking action") and related terms have always played a central role in social work. This relates to the aim and challenge of ensuring that *Handlungswissen* – "knowledge how", i.e. knowledge about taking action – “finds its way into practice and can be implemented as actions, thus achieving goals” (Treptow, 2011: 70). The term *Handeln* is found in many facets of social work: (a) Social work can, for example, be understood as a full-time or voluntary job which involves coordinating actions connected to individuals, on one hand, and organisations, on the other. (b) The three classic methods – case work, group work and community work – can be seen as applying methods guided by professional rules. (c) The various fields of management in social work (such as organisational analysis, leadership, knowledge management, planning and project management, consulting management, case management, conflict management) are an expression of actions taken within social work to create order. (d) Commonly used phrases include *Beratungshandeln* (interventions at advice centres), *helfendes Handeln* (taking supportive action in child welfare), *Handlungskompetenz* (full-time workers being able to act effectively in line with current technical and methodological standards) and – the focus of this article – social work’s *Handlungsfelder*: fields of practice.

2. Social work as a collection of differing fields of practice

Social work’s fields of practice can be defined in terms of their function, context and the people addressed by the support and schemes. A distinction can also be made between fields of practice organised over the life courses of people within society based on the type of action taken: for social work actors, social pedagogical practice means not only educating and advising people, but also motivating, arranging, mediating, managing, documenting, organising, and providing care (Uhlendorff, 2011: 99–105). In this context, it should be remembered that although the main focus in every field of practice is on practical action, these interacting tasks can differ in nature depending on the specific task in hand, the prevailing structural conditions, the actors’ training and even local institutional conditions (facilities, staff-to-client ra-
tio). Nonetheless, when action is taken in educational situations, this always means action as in changing circumstances and/or making things possible.

In Germany, social work has always been oriented towards what society considers to be normal. This understanding of normality revolves particularly around paid work. A dynamic process of social differentiation has made this particular aspect the focus of a broad range of fields of social work practice, from children’s daycare to care for the elderly; from family support and residential childcare to support for people who are homeless or have no fixed abode; from work with individuals and groups to taking action in local communities. This process of social differentiation has various, complex roots – but over time those roots have merged into one another. As a result, all these spheres are summed up here under the general term “social work”.

Over the good century that has passed, activities in the fields of practice have – as the descriptions in this article will show – on one hand moved so far away from the authoritarian, controlling attitude of the old welfare system, and on the other hand extended and branched out so much that they today represent a very widely varying range of social services. In short, those fields of practice have a firmly established place in human geography, play a role in the various stages of life and touch people’s life histories and life courses (Müller, 1993).

Over the history of social work, a sweeping change has taken place regarding the balance between the individual in need and the social mandate of ensuring social stability by eliminating conflict and adversity. Education and training has replaced control, advice has replaced intervention, services and support have supplanted enforcement. Prevention is attempted where support and correction were once only offered in the face of difficult circumstances and deviant behaviour, and preventive steps are only taken to avoid possible negative events. People are encouraged and helped to help themselves, instead of undergoing regulation and monitoring.

Even though social work is today undoubtedly much more complex than when its first fields of practice were founded, and even though its practice has since changed considerably, the following reconstruction of the historical development and fundamental issues tackled in the different fields of social work nonetheless show that many aspects of modern social work can be traced back to the beginnings of the welfare state in Germany.
3. Historical roots of social work’s fields of practice in the shadow of the welfare state

In Germany, social work developed in the last third of the 19th century as social reformers’ response to the “Social Question” arising from the large-scale movement, rural exodus and impoverishment of people who had once worked in agriculture, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. In view of this dramatic social change, traditional, repressive policing strategies and regulatory measures increasingly proved inadequate. As a result, there was an increasing focus on the need for change with regard to social issues, i.e. the relationship between the individual and society. This was directly linked to a call among educationalists for these social problems to be dealt with not only through institutionalised material support (in the form of an insurance system for contributing workers, to prevent or at least alleviate social predicaments) but also through compensatory educational and social pedagogical support and measures, aimed at the individual. In the wake of this development, the German welfare state came to divide its tasks in a very specific way, in a dual structure that shapes it to this day: tasks involving safeguarding people’s livelihoods and supporting them in material emergencies are covered by laws on social security and social welfare, while social work and social pedagogy concentrate on individualised educational and psychological services (Münchmeier, 2012: 49).

The early days of the welfare state in Germany are closely linked to the beginnings of social security legislature and the establishment of the different branches of social security at the end of the 19th century: 1883 health insurance, 1884 accident insurance, 1889 disability and old-age insurance (pension), 1927 unemployment insurance. These were joined in 1994 by long-term care insurance. Key structural features are still in effect today: ● the principle of compulsory insurance (with a varied range of insurance companies), ● the principle of being entitled to benefits without means testing (that is, if criteria a, b, c etc. are fulfilled, then legally attested benefits are provided, with no elbow room regarding the specified amount), ● the equal financing of social security by employees and employers, and ● the obligation to pay contributions based on earned income.

The beginnings of state-regulated, universal social policy went hand in hand with endeavours to transform the German state's traditional responsibility for individuals’ welfare (and thus for the individually differing forms of social need) from universal, state-regulated welfare for the poor into discrete, specialised branches of welfare. These were later institutionalised as sepa-
rate fields of social work practice. By around the turn of the twentieth century, in a process that was historically accidental, i.e. by no means purposefully planned, those fields of practice had fully separated, based on groups of people with similar problems, into healthcare, youth and family welfare, and support for the homeless and unemployed. This was purely the result of practical experiences at that time, and a powerful expression of tremendous faith in people’s “educability” (Hering, Münchmeier, 2014). Even today, social work continues to act within the boundaries of the traditional situations of inequality marked out at that time, which still make up the field’s central subject: age-related or developmental inequalities between adults and non-adults due to the conflict between immaturity and autonomy; and social inequalities due to the conflict between accepted norms and deviation, or between the haves and have-nots (Schweppe, 2014: 123).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, and especially the 1920s, many fields of practice underwent a sudden spurt of modernisation and institutionalisation. On one hand, public welfare was increasingly placed in the hands of trained professionals; on the other, social work was given a basis in the law, with the most comprehensive developments taking place in the field of youth welfare. One example is the 1922 Imperial Youth Welfare Act (Reichsjugendwohlfahrtsgesetz, the historical predecessor of the eighth book of today's Social Code – SGB VIII, dealing with child welfare), which envisioned the setting up of an organised system of child welfare run by the state (e.g. the youth welfare department) and independent providers (e.g. charitable organisations, churches, associations). This legislation was connected to the constitution of youth welfare as what is still a central field of social work practice, and the institutionalisation of social support and monitoring, taken over by two institutions: the youth welfare department and the youth welfare committee (Jugendamt and Jugendhilfeausschuss). These plan and provide youth welfare as a joint action by public and private providers.

In the Nazi period, the Imperial Youth Welfare Act was not repealed, but youth welfare and other fields of practice (e.g. family support, healthcare, housing support) were instrumentalised to achieve Nazi goals – and aligned with Nazi ideology (Gleichschaltung) to a great extent via the establishment of the National Socialist People’s Welfare system. The post-war period was largely shaped by social reconstruction and thus the reorganisation of social work, especially in the fields of healthcare and family support, among other things to get the populace back to work. Refugee work emerged as a new field of practice to overcome the integration problems affecting refugees and resettlers after the end of the war. Faced with young
people who lacked any job, training or home, in the first few years after the war the field of youth welfare was expanded, with the addition of youth social work, youth careers development and employability schemes to tackle youth unemployment. To this day, the field helps young people integrate at school, at work and socially when struggling with serious disadvantages as they compete for training placements and jobs (Schulze-Krüdener, Ley, 2018).

4. Fields of social work practice branch out in times of societal and social reform

From the late 1960s on, social work practice began to branch out on a huge scale as the result of changes in reformist policy under a social-liberal coalition. These changes not only entailed a longer period of compulsory schooling and a sharp rise in attendance figures (at first at secondary schools, later also at universities) but also contributed to the fact that, over the last few decades, partly linked to the constantly changing dynamics behind the developments within German society, social work has come to be seen as being much more than a traditional system of emergency support. The changes have also led to a redefinition of social work’s place in society: its services have increasingly come to be understood as part of the infrastructure; as something which everyone needs, even if they are not necessarily used by everyone, but perhaps only by a minority.

In the wake of these historical developmental trends, in which social work can be described as functionally responsible for almost all areas of social integration, the pre- and extra-curricular fields of social work (kindergarten, youth work, social work in schools) also expanded considerably. Another driving force behind the branching out of fields of practice was changes in the prevailing set of social problems, sometimes triggered by social protest movements (such as the student movement or the women's movement), and prompting the formation of new fields of work such as work with girls and women, cultural work, health promotion or work with the elderly (Krüger, Rauschenbach, 2012: 12). At the same time, there was an unprecedented surge in academic inflation and professionalisation in social work jobs and courses: since 1969, it has been possible to study social work on degree courses in educational science (previously the Diplom; today BA and MA courses) at universities and other institutes of higher education, meaning that the fields of social work practice can now draw upon highly qualified staff. The rise in the level of education considerably extended the range of tasks and issues tackled by social work, as well as its stockpiles of knowledge and research capacities. This, in turn, triggered a developmental spurt that was pivotal in the formation of further specialisms and, moreover, added to the number of jobs in social work, largely in the form of
new, labour-market-specific forms of employment for women. As well as the professionals specifically trained in social work, the field today continues to employ a large number of other categories of people, e.g. those qualified in other subjects but doing paid work in the sector, or those working in an honorary capacity, as volunteers or in the form of civic engagement, sometimes with no training.

Transitions have increasingly come into the focus of social work in recent decades: subjective, biographical transitions and institutional transitions (e.g. the transition to parenthood, from kindergarten to school, in youth welfare [such as care leavers], transitions at school and into work, or ageing as a transitional process) – and those transitions bring up the fundamental question for social work of how social requirements and opportunities (especially on the labour market) can be balanced with individuals’ needs and interests. Increasingly, transitions (understood as changes on people’s social status within their life courses and biographies) are taking place in the institutional setting of social work, and new areas of work are appearing in fields of social work practice, such as transition management (e.g. from school to training, employment to retirement) and transition counselling (e.g. in the context of experiences of migration).

There are, however, many other reasons why the fields of practice branched out to such a great extent in Germany in the second half of the 20th century (some talk of a “social pedagogical century”). The process has also involved the emergence and expansion of highly specialised fields of practice relating, above all, to social pedagogical involvement over the various life stages (child welfare, socio-educational and family support, geriatric care) and the biographical structuring of the life course (childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, old age). Along with the steady expansion of new fields of work with specific target groups (girls/women, boys/men, immigrants, etc.), this is pluralising social work’s clients, a process that can ultimately be described as the fields of social work practice splitting into client-specific strands (Homfeldt, Schulze-Krüdener, 2008).

5. An attempt to bring order to the labyrinthine fields of social work practice
The branching out of the fields of social work practice and the expanding range of its practitioners have been accompanied by the consolidation of social work as a professionalised, institutionalised system of practice which provides or gives structure to communally organised social assistance and services offering support and education to help people cope with life, or
education by social work professionals, sometimes in new social spheres such as housing or immigration (Thole, 2012: 27–28). In this context, the fields of social work practice can be divided into four main groups, which can be further split (based on the degree to which they encroach upon clients’ lifeworlds) into fields which either complement, support or supplant their lifeworlds.

- Firstly, there is the field of child welfare which supports, complements or supplants the family – e.g. child daycare facilities and youth work assistance and schemes which complement their lifeworlds; non-residential children's social care services, the general social services and youth court assistance which support their lifeworlds, and residential children's social care assistance and schemes which supplant their lifeworlds.

- Secondly, there is the diffuse field of social services for adults – support which complements their lifeworlds, e.g. for welfare recipients, debt counselling, support for people who are homeless or have no fixed abode, care for refugees, resettlers and asylum seekers, rehabilitation measures, occupational social work and unemployment centres; assistance and schemes which support their lifeworlds, e.g. housing for homeless men and women, guardianship for adults, support for probationers and newly released prisoners; and assistance and schemes which supplant their lifeworlds, such as social work in prisons and women's shelters.

- Thirdly, there is the field of geriatric care – e.g. non-residential care services and old-age clubs which complement their lifeworlds; daycare facilities for elderly people which support their lifeworlds; and schemes such as retirement homes and hospices which supplant their lifeworlds.

- Fourthly, there are schemes within the healthcare system – e.g. socio-psychiatric services, occupational health services or health counselling centres which complement people’s lifeworlds; assistance and schemes which support people’s lifeworlds such as semi-residential rehabilitation, workshops for people with disabilities or social services in hospital; and finally schemes which supplant their lifeworlds, such as institutions providing clinical social work and rehabilitation.

Considering the broad array of fields of practice and the expanding range of its practitioners, social work could be described as a growth industry; an assessment that is supported by an empirical analysis of social work professionals’ success on the employment market. However, it must not be forgotten that currently, sweeping processes of social change – keywords being
the stripping down of the welfare state, globalisation, crisis on the labour market, digitisation – mean that many social work professionals are having to come to terms with forces of marginalisation with regard to typical working relationships: they are employed in jobs which are either paid below the negotiated rate, temporary, on reduced hours or all three at once.

6. Times are changing for the fields of social work practice

Faced with social change, a lack of money, pressure to privatise and competing social services, all fields of practice have come under considerable pressure in the last roughly thirty years to undergo modernisation. This has been accompanied by pressure to justify their existence, expressed among other things as calls to improve their quality and quality standards, modernise and manage their organisation, and increase planning, transparency, goal-setting, financial controlling and effectiveness, with a stronger focus on products, clients, the market and cooperation (Schulze-Krüdener, 2017). As a result of these growing demands for social work to justify its existence, there have been widespread calls for precise statistical measurements of the funding used, the volume of services provided, the number of clients and the number of people employed in the fields of social work practice and its associated institutions. To date, no comprehensive statistics have been compiled on social work; the only pertinent data available are the official statistics on child welfare, this being one of the largest fields of social work practice. At this juncture, it is apposite to mention some selected findings from the fourth and current edition of these indicator-based analyses (Autorengruppe Kinder- und Jugendhilfestatistik, 2019):

- Approximately 13.5 million young people under the age of 18 lived in Germany in 2016, of whom 35.4% had immigrant origins. 3.6 million children attend a kindergarten or children's daycare facilities. Around 213,000 young people use family-supplanting support (of whom nearly 127,000 are in an institution and around 86,000 are in a foster family). More than 750,000 young people make regular use of child and youth work schemes. A latent or acute threat to the best interests of the child was found in more than 45,000 cases.
- A personal service, the child welfare services have reached an all-time high of more than 800,000 employees (88% of whom are female) and public funding of almost EUR 38 billion a year, underlining their significant role in society.
- The child welfare services have 55,000 facilities, with 3.8 million places. Independent youth welfare services still run a good two thirds of those facilities, upholding their
privileged position in the German welfare system. It should be noted that children’s residential care institutions are almost all independent: charitable organisations such as the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany) and Diakonie (the Protestant welfare organisation), the Catholic Church and Caritas (the Catholic welfare association), the umbrella organisation Paritätische and private, commercial providers. In child and youth work, more than 36% of providers of child and youth welfare services are publicly run (i.e. by municipalities).

In times when welfare state reform is predicted to continue, and social problems such as rising poverty and long-term unemployment are expected to increase, the future will see more and more of the politically imposed austerity measures which accompany the pressure to follow the economic discourse on administrative rationalisation and modernisation. Measures of this kind are already having a huge impact on working conditions. In many fields of practice, the ongoing paring down of the welfare state, and the recurrent idea that social work should be organised as an economic market activity based on the principles of supply and demand, are seen by workers in the social sector as a growing threat to their professional existence. Alongside these concerns about their future careers, there is sound empirical evidence that the austerity drive described above is leading to a problematic combination of professional aspirations, institutional constraints, a dearth of resources and psychological stress, with the situation in each specific field of practice always depending on its social status and on political priorities (GEW, 2018).

These aspects will be demonstrated in the following based on the example of the field of youth welfare practice (cf. Seckinger, van Santen, 2009). In the wake of various efforts since the 1970s to reform the youth welfare services, culminating in the adoption of the eighth book of the German Social Code (SGB VIII) in 1991, there was a shift of focus towards younger children, rather than adolescents, as the clients addressed by child welfare: towards the long-standing need to provide more childcare and child protection schemes. This early investment in children’s positive development is connected on one hand to hopes of preventing future problems. On the other hand, this focus on encouraging and supporting younger children involves turning the spotlight away from adolescents’ needs (e.g. leading to the closure of youth facilities) and reinterpretting services required by law as optional services which can easily be done without.
Looking at the big picture, this development is not only an example of society making use of the fields of social work practice, or an example of their functioning within society: it is also a sign that the guiding principles in every field of practice (whether that means the clients’ needs, society’s interests or the interests prevalent within the field itself) can always change. One major upcoming change is the planned implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with regard to the field of practice of child welfare: there is a broad consensus within child welfare that the eighth book of the German Social Code (SGB VIII) needs to be made inclusive, covering the support required for the inclusion of all young people with, or facing, disabilities. An inclusive SGB VIII necessarily means an investment in a fairer society; an investment that is not without cost.

Let us finish by summing up the situation. The term “field of practice” (Handlungsfeld) has two main meanings. Firstly, it is linked to the fact that social work is a professional (often also honorary) activity that is carried out in a social field such as the family, a setting such as the school or home, or even a city district, in the form of helping clients make their everyday life more successful. Secondly, however, fields of practice are also linked to the underlying context behind clients’ actions, ranging from the structure of institutions, organisations and service providers, laws and ordinances, to notions of normality that are more or less unquestioned and have come to be considered natural. In that context, social work is exposed to conflicting interests and goals. On one hand, it is expected to work on behalf of the state or municipality to help specific clients integrate into society who are temporarily or permanently unable to meet social and/or economic requirements. On the other hand, social work operates on the side of disadvantaged people in the fight against unjust structures rooted in the state and municipality.

Professional practice in the various fields of social work thus involves a difficult combination of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, along with an ability to appropriately reflect the contradictory conditions found in each different field. The scope of that reflection depends on each specific, unique case and institutional circumstances. These are what provide practitioners with possible courses of action and social embeddedness. Some activities may partly overlap with those carried out by other professionals providing support, such as doctors, psychologists or theologians: for example, doctors working on individual cases follow the four steps of studying the case history, making a diagnosis, carrying out an intervention and making an evaluation; or teachers offer instructions, and theologians do pastoral work. However,
their goals are different. Compared with those professions, social work has a broader remit in terms of both social and societal policy. Professionals in the fields of social work practice find themselves in the position of having to deal with the fact that society presents them with tasks for which politics does not offer a solution, and that social work is unable to develop a solution as it lacks the necessary resources. In schools and the justice system, for example, this might take the shape of not being able to make decisions, as social work is assigned the role of an auxiliary safety net for the welfare state, reliant on the respective social protection system and the resources it allocates. One aspect that is important to every field of social work practice is public relations. In the public sphere, social work is exposed to considerable pressure in the mass media. It is accused of intervening too late, or not intervening at all; of getting in the way, and sometimes even of leaving people at greater risk and in need for help (e.g. in issues related to child protection and children’s rights) (Homfeldt, Schulze-Krüdener, 2003).

The rate at which social work is expanding and its branching out into specialisms extending “from the cradle to the grave, or from unborn life to death” has frequently been noted. The shadow cast by the unintended side-effects of that expansion may, however, be even more far-reaching: if social work is there to promote social integration, then its growth may also be a sign of social deficits (Rauschenbach, 1995: 102). In short, according to that interpretation, every time a new field of social work practice appears in response to prevalent social problems, society has failed, and the supposed success story of social work paradoxically results from society being pacified by the welfare state.

References


