What's Up? The possibilities of subject-scientific practice research in social work: A methodological 'explorative report'[1]

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Abstract

The article introduces a qualitative study of the structural change of social work in Germany from the standpoint of professional practitioners. The focus of the presentation is on the depiction of the project's subject-scientific foundations, its research-methodological challenges, and new possibilities explored in particular. Finally, central findings are presented, illustrating (1) the historical-structural challenges in social work and (2) the spectrum of possibilities through which to address them. For the practical transfer of these findings, different settings were identified and applied. In conclusion, the range of possibilities for action is discussed in the context of social work's so-called 'punitive trend'. Against this contemporary backdrop, further research is needed to better understand processes of orientation and acquisition of professionals in social work.

Keywords
practice research, research-methodes, social work professionals, reason patterns

Introduction

Practice research in the field of social work has undergone considerable differentiation over the last several decades, generating numerous insights with the intention of contributing to a progressive professionalisation of the sector.

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[1] Translated by Loren Balhorn and Jan-Peter Herrmann

That said, what exactly counts as progressive remains highly controversial, as do questions of epistemological, theoretical, conceptual and methological foundations. To uncover the specificities of a subject-scientific research perspective, it is useful to first assess existing research experiences and make them accessible for discussion. In this spirit, the following article attempts to illustrate, in an exemplary fashion, the possible utilisation of subject-scientific principles for conceptualising practice research. The example selected for this case study is a qualitative survey of the general framework of social work from the perspective of professionals (see Eichinger, 2009). The study allows us to both demonstrate the challenges related to research practice, as well as introduce tried and tested methodological procedures. Subsequently, the main findings are summarised with particular focus on the relevance of wage labour conditions. Finally, the applicability of these findings to (transfer-) settings in support of an emancipatory-transformative practice is outlined.

Research project design

The research project's point of reference was the neoliberal shift in social values, which champions the self-responsibility of society's individual members and emphasises the centrality of civil society organisations, which ought to be supported rather than inhibited by social policy measures such as the provision of social work (see, among others, Leisering 2003, p. 172). The restructuring of the general framework of social work in line with international trends occurred in Germany, on the one hand, through the economisation of social services over the 1990s. At the same time, the country witnessed a programmatic reorientation of social work around the concept of the activating state. Thus, although the realignment of social policy dates back roughly 20 years, its implications for social work continue to be heatedly and controversially discussed even today (on theoretical and practical projects of critique, see Kessl, 2012; Bund demokratischer Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler e.V., 2016). The topically pertinent research project presented here focuses on the perspective of professional practitioners asking: *how, and at which levels do structural changes become palpable for professional social workers?* And: *given the new corresponding challenges, which modes of thought and action do they utilise or develop?* The study sought to identify established modes of thought and action as variants of processing or coping with certain social contradictions.

In developing a theoretical foundation for the research project, terms and concepts from critical psychology were drawn on as tools of thought and study. Critical psychology, as a Marxist science of the subject, conceives of

professional practitioners as individuals (see Holzkamp, 1985, p. 355) who are forced to act within existing balances of forces, conflicts, and contradictions (due to their objective determination), which in turn shape the general frameworks (through the subjective determination of action premises) in which they act (see Markard 2015, p. 46). The object of science conducted from the standpoint of the subject is not individuals and their modes of thought and action, but rather '[…] the concrete living conditions in their subjective meaning, i.e. the social reality as perceived by individuals depending on their specific situation and the social interpretations and action possibilities available to them' (Osterkamp, 2001, p. 8).

To individuals, social structures offer both limitations to and possibilities of action from which they select those, which appear useful for their specific needs, thus establishing them as their own personal (action) premises. The basic assumption that humans do not consciously act against their own vital interests implies, in terms of academic language's reason discourse, that there can be no such thing as irrational or illogical behaviour, but rather only actions which are not yet understood and thus can become the object of practice research. By reconstructing so-called 'reason patterns', it becomes possible to discern: why do *I* rationally think and act – given my location- and position-specific living conditions, interests and sensitivities – in the way I do? The subject-scientific approach can be used to reconstruct the relationship between (institutional) conditions and action possibilities and sensitivities. According to Markard and Holzkamp (1989, p. 7), this facilitates 'analysing everyday problems, fears, disappointments […] with view to their real causes and thus […] their changeability as well'. The study's focus was placed on practical knowledge, conceived of in critical psychology as (social-subjective) *knowledge of context and contradictions* to be reconstructed. With regard to content, it encompasses the 'results of analysing problematic professional constellations and their solutions' (Ulmann & Markard, 2000, p. 223). Data evaluation aimed to produce historical-structural insights, in the sense 'that hypothetical – cross-case – statements are made possible in a way that allows for establishing the corresponding links wherever the identified dimensions occur' (Markard, 1993, p. 36).

Knowledge of context and contradictions derived from these more general statements can become transformative knowledge of professionals' spaces of opportunity. This is the case if knowledge is seen as useful in the discovery of alternative views or modes of action in current practice situations directly tied to work with users and recipients, or in shaping the organisational design. The key feature of science from the standpoint of the subject is object adequacy (*Gegenstandsadäquatheit*, see Markard, 2009, p. 266). Object suitability is often

discussed as a quality criterion in qualitative research as well (see Steinke, 2000, p. 326). In line with its conception of the subject, the subject-scientific approach obliges researchers to allow those studied – in our case, professional practitioners – to participate as *co-researchers* in the methodological realisation of the research project to the greatest possible extent. The methodological principle of participation pertains to both the selection of the problem being studied as well as the process of data collection and analysis. This modus operandi should not be understood as an attempt to deny researchers' interests. Instead: 'The problem to be investigated may not remain a problem of the researcher alone, but must be a problem of the affected party, or rather must be formulated in cooperation with those affected in such a way as to make clear that it is also their problem' (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 544-545).

As a precondition of successful interviews, this meant the study had to acknowledge the changes occurring for workers in this sector and perceive them as such. Granting opportunities for participation is thus not some vague emancipatory gesture, but in fact rests on a specific understanding of the object of study (see Markard, 2009, p. 277). With regard to the tension between authenticity and structure in research project design, it must be noted that the perspective on a given field of study through use of the selected subject-scientific research perspective naturally becomes decidedly more structured. According to Holzkamp (1983), it is imperative to determine whether a research idea is productively compatible with the subject-scientific understanding of the object of study – or rather, the pertinent categorical determinations and thus specific epistemological interests related to it – at the beginning of the research process. Such a structured view simultaneously reinforces an openness for each subject-perspective's relevant context of meaning and its embeddedness in social conditions.

On methodological principles in the research routine

In the framework of partially standardised problem-centred interviews, (mostly) social workers and educational staff with advanced degrees were surveyed through a specific script (see Witzel, 1982). Interviewee selection was guided by the principle of 'maximal contrast' (Kleining, 1995, p. 226), designed to detect the greatest variation in working conditions rather than attain statistical representativity.[2] Taking into account the critical-psychological approach and the

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[2] Specifically, my selection criteria – by which I sought the utmost possible contrast – included the type of employer, how a position was financed, employment status, workplace function, as well as aspects such as work experience and private obligations.

concept of the *social mediation of individual existence*, the distinction between *social action possibilities* and *individual realisation conditions* was essential. According to Holzkamp, the latter must be 'explicitly known and taken into consideration with regard to their content, as they belong to the "constitutive factors" determining my respective empirically ascertainable affectivity/action capacity, for only this way can the mediatedness of "my" action with social action possibilities become palpable for me as the basis of generalisation' (1985, p. 549).

Prior to the actual interviews, short questionnaires were sent out to ensure the conditions of realisation. The material analysed in the stricter sense comprised a total of 15 interviews. Data evaluation focused on the practical occupational challenges and conflicts with regard to their structural interlinkage in the context of ongoing change. The basic framework of the qualitative content analysis comprised, with reference to Mayring (2005), a set of preliminary (working) categories determined by the current state of the field (for example, empirical studies). Additional (primary) categories were derived from the sample. The concept of co-researchers was implemented through *communicative validation* (see Groeben & Scheele, 2000) during the process of data evaluation. This procedure is designed to improve the authenticity of the data collected and limit researchers' privilege of interpretation. Moreover, it is not assumed that whatever is first stated is automatically the most authentic information, nor that these data are the most reliable (see Markard 2000, p. 228). Specifically, this meant that the written transcripts of the interviews (including potential follow-up questions) were returned to respondents to allow them to specify or amend their statements. For an inter-subjective research process with the aim of helping respondents to better understand and develop themselves, it generally seems wise for co-researchers to adopt central subject-scientific categories (see Holzkamp, 1985, p. 543). That said, this seemed quite unfeasible given the scope of this study – a doctoral thesis – and was thus neglected from the outset for pragmatic reasons. Communicative validation, then, proved problematic. To begin with, not all interviewees managed to read the transcript in their limited amount of free time. Those who did responded only to say they saw no need for any changes. The small number of follow-up questions I included, however, were answered by all respondents with only one exception. Some admitted to difficulties reading

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Concrete sampling was composed of skilled labour forces from across the country employed by public and/or independent private providers. Their positions are partially funded by grants and subsidies, as well as compensation for services rendered. Their fields of activity include child and youth services (e.g. outpatient social-pedagogical family assistance, stationary assisted living, and public youth work), assistance for the mentally ill, addiction treatment, ex-offenders' assistance, caring for the homeless, as well as the area of training, advanced training and further education.

the transcript due to their own clumsy formulations. One interviewee wrote: 'To put it bluntly, I'm somewhat embarrassed by my text." Another aspect of the responses potentially crucial to the project was that some viewed their statements as highly controversial and doubted I could guarantee 100-percent anonymity, expressing fears that the case study's planned publication could endanger their job.[3] Taking the co-researchers seriously, then, required – given the openness many exhibited in this regard – that the remaining evaluation process take their perceived vulnerability into methodological account. Against this backdrop, I developed an assessment strategy of ideal-type reason patterns with the aim of 'not ascribing people […] to certain types [of ideal-type reason patterns, U.E.]', but to illustrate 'the variants of processing a given situation of social contradiction' (Bader, 1987, p. 150).

The experiences described in the interviews formed empirical anchor points in the sense of individual cases, through reference to which the ideal-type reason patterns were constructed. In this case, grasping the context of meaning between the individual features of an ideal-type reason pattern required construing possible links between premises and causes based on empirical data and identifying their specific functionality and contradictoriness. The process of devising a typology was divided into four steps, as suggested by Kelle and Kluge (1999, p. 75). The first step was dedicated to the elaboration and establishment of relevant comparative dimensions: which aspect(s) of structural change do respondents perceive as most central? How are these changes assessed? How is the mode of appropriation with regard to these changes justified? What purpose can be identified? Which lines of conflict and hitherto undetected aspects can be identified? The second step involved distinguishing commonalities and differences between individual cases. Key to the reconstruction of both was less the presence of identical wording so much as a correspondence between the content of respective responses. In a third step, five preliminary ideal-type reason patterns were developed in the sense of working hypotheses. These were then condensed and more precisely defined by drawing on data from all of the interviews. Finally, the individual ideal-type reason patterns were described.

The co-researcher principle was primarily implemented through data validation in the form of a 'member check'. Furthermore, interviewee feedback was taken into account in the further development of the method of interpretation, albeit not in a participatory manner. The doctoral thesis containing the results was presented to other social work professionals at two meetings, leading to a discussion with the aim of validating the results through other actors

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[3] Historically speaking, the existential dimension of this concern is absolutely understandable, as conditions on Germany's labour market were rather unfavourable in this service sector at the time data were collected.

in the field.[4] Meeting participants indicated that they had 'found themselves' in and 'felt understood' by my deliberations.

Key empirical findings

The study's findings suggest trenchant lines of conflict in the context of the neoliberal order of social work from the standpoint of professional practitioners. With regard to social working conditions, interviewees described instances of de-solidarisation among colleagues and processes of flexibilisation and even precarisation in their workplaces. Although change(s) may manifest in differing ways across individual work situations, the *key challenge* facing professionals is to develop practices which both serve the *preservation of an institution* and *secure one's personal livelihood*, as well as account for *professional-ethical responsibility* – three objectives with the potential to come into increasing conflict with one another. However, the professional, or rather occupational reality under wage-labour conditions is heavily underemphasised in favour of professional ideals, even in more prominent contributions to the debate around social work's mission and public mandate (see Eichinger, 2017). It can be established that, based on the science of the subject approach,

1. it is possible to posit assertions concerning historical-structural requirements and challenges in social work. Furthermore,
2. the range of modes of dealing with these changes can be deduced. Based on the range of alternatives, it becomes clear that there is an always (somewhat) limited variant, albeit potentially aimed at transformation – to which I return at a later point.

Reflecting the general ambivalence towards workplace alterations on the part of workers themselves, the modes of coping present among respondents range from 'I remain open and take a positive attitude because I consider the innovations to constitute an advancement and/or may avoid negative sanctions in this way' (RP 1) to 'I rely on guerrilla tactics, as this allows me to at least mitigate the negative effects of change' (RP 3), and even such reason patterns as 'I adopt a critical stance towards the innovations in order to recognise negative developments and, if needed, push for structural improvements' (RP 5).

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[4] In the case of individual portraits, one method of conclusive validation could have been self-subsumption under (certain) reason patterns.

Overview of Ideal-Type Reason Patterns (RP)

RP 1	RP 2	RP 3	RP 4	RP 5
Remain open and retain a positive attitude	**Perseverance – rulebook slowdown**	**Guerrilla tactics or the strategy of passive resistance**	**Being pragmatic and supporting the individual**	**Being critical and advocating for structural improvements**
- Outdated structures are broken up, opening up opportunities for further professional and personal development - Flexibility and openness is vital to persist and develop	- Refusal to implement reforms, as primarily negative effects are perceived - Changes are professionally inappropriate, lead to a deterioration of working conditions	- the experience of difficulties caused by the changes, and the lack of prospects to participate or sit them out, leads to resignation - Lacking a formal mechanism of participation, loopholes on the fringes of legality are utilised to mitigate negative effects	- doing whatever is possible, despite things being 'as they are now' - victories may be won in individual cases - success in individual cases preserves work morale - advanced training allows for additional personal security	- both opportunities as well as negative consequences are taken into account - criticism and further development are perceived as both possible and necessary - dissatisfaction with the status quo, or rather the degree of realisation of professional expectations - should the workplace level offer only a limited degree of participation, activity on political levels becomes all the more important

Concerning the choice between different modes of coping effectively taking place in everyday life, the question arises as to whether historical-structural contexts of meaning assume central relevance in everyday processes of orientation. In considering, or rather accentuating the various options for action, recurring concerns about one's own job emerged as a relevant aspect (see, among others, Eichinger 2009, p. 178). A (recent) study of social work in communal

refugee housing also points to the relevance of the wage labour condition when professionals develop ways of dealing with their specific professional-practical challenges (see Eichinger & Schäuble, 2018).[5]

Specific problems can be expected should the reason patterns (see table) result in a certain action practice, all of which were mentioned by respondents themselves. The first reason pattern, for instance, may favour dismissing the problematic consequences of change. If it is assumed that the new requirements can be accommodated individually, this may encourage a drive towards continual self-optimisation, which in turn can lead to outright self-exploitation. Behaviour guided by pattern number three, then, may entail considerable psychological strain due to the fear of being caught or violating one's own 'standard of correctness'. Furthermore, the risk involved in openly addressing forms of coping with change on the threshold of illegality brings with it the danger of atomisation. A practice oriented around the fifth pattern appears attractive only to those with sufficient resources at their disposal who wish to invest them in this way, particularly as the risk of losing one's job due to recalcitrance should not be underestimated.

In retrospect, and in light of the insights gained, it seems safe to conclude that the decision to change the subject-scientific research method while simultaneously retaining – out of pragmatic, or rather ethical considerations – the reason discourse's academic mode of thought and language has stood the test. Thus, although the project may have failed to live up to the potential of subject-scientific action research guided by the principle of the unity of cognition and practical change (see Fahl & Markard, 1999), at the same time, as Markard points out (Markard 2009, p. 277), the regulations of subject-scientific research are not intended to prevent research but rather optimise it to the greatest possible extent, motivated by the specific epistemological interest as such.

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[5] These findings merit further consideration in light of current analyses of the establishment of disciplining-responsibilising professionalisation patterns in social work (see Lutz et al., 2013). These studies address an 'in whatever form that may be – increasingly rigid, or "tougher" dealing with [users'] behaviour in defiance of expectations and norms' (Dollinger, 2011, p. 26). In one study, employees whose context of service provision included low wages, fixed-term contracts and a low level of work satisfaction, provided information, which could be regarded as punitive attitudes more frequently (Dollinger, Oelkers, & Ziegler, 2014). According to Hirtenlehner (2010, p. 214), the immediate (personal or social) economic situation is less relevant in this regard than the extent of the corresponding uncertainty and anxiety.

Transferring results: Professionals in dialogue

Due to the fact that the fundamental possibilities of the co-researcher concept, the principle of the unity of cognition and practical change, were only realised in the context of the doctoral thesis to a limited extent, the question of utilising our findings for professional practice arose following the project's conclusion.[6] The results briefly outlined above do not constitute immediate transformative knowledge relevant to occupational practice. It is thus essential for (subject-scientific) practice research to ask how acquired knowledge can become an impulse for the self-understanding of one's own conscious and unconscious involvement. So far, various sites of transfer, ranging from 'classical' workshops to performative approaches – namely a (forum) theatre project devoted to social work (directed by Stephan Antczack) – have been explored as 'practice spaces' for naming, discussing and reflecting upon familiar thought patterns and action practices, as well as trying until now unexplored possibilities. What became most evident on these occasions was that there are even more individual and collective reason patterns, or coping strategies, in the field of social work.[7] In my view, it is particularly instructive to consider the broad empirical scope in order to keep the awareness of alternatives alive. If a sensitivity for or even an existing knowledge of the respective functionality of specific existing practices exists, this may represent an initial transformative step as well as the precondition for dialogue across partially shared and organisable interests. It would indeed be illuminating to initiate a conversation with the attendees of the events mentioned above concerning what significance the impulses they experienced had or have for their professional practice. The development and trial of a systematic method for the determination of utility for an intervening, transformative practice is yet to be accomplished.[8]

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[6] With the exception of some deliberations on utilising the findings for supporting workplace health, as legally stipulated by the European Union (see Eichinger 2009, p. 196).

[7] Other strategies included, for instance, the individual exit strategy of not even entering the occupational field after completing the degree due to unattractive working conditions and the dim prospects of realising professional expectations, up to the collective 'self-liquidation' of a provider with the readiness to re-found itself should the required resources become available once again.

[8] In this regard, concepts or methods on the organisational design could be examined.

Outlook

The presented findings underscore how useful it can be for practice analyses to systematically elaborate both objective meaning (such as institutional/organisational contexts of providing basic services, the professionalisation of social work) as well as personal meaning (such as biographical experiences, physical capacities/limitations, social relationships) with view to thought and action premises. As it were, (partially unconscious) processes of orientation require more attention in the context of subject-scientific practice research, namely through:

1. conscious perception of possible meanings relevant to orientation, either out of curiosity or caused by a specific action problem (need for orientation),
2. the evaluation of meanings relevant to orientation (emotional/cognitive) with regard to their degree of utility, as well as
3. the appropriation (including in the sense of dual possibilities; see Holzkamp, 1985, p. 355)/non-appropriation itself (see also, among others, Marvakis, 1996, p. 70).

A more conscious exploitation of *spaces of opportunity* entails the option of perceiving and responsibly taking seriously one's own role in shaping the status quo. The corresponding self-educational processes may prove both relieving and disappointing, as what is desired may not be attainable for the time being. At the same time, however, once practices in which *I limit myself* and *I limit others* become apparent, they could serve as an encouraging point of reference – including, perhaps, with a chance of experiencing, addressing, discussing, and maybe even intelligently expanding these limitations more consciously.[9] At any rate, the preceding reflections on the instruments of institutional analysis developed in the context of subject-scientific research in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as more recent work in organisational sociology, by all means merit further elaboration elsewhere.

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[9] Furthermore, an examination of the relevance of specific contexts of service provision such as precarious employment conditions is needed for the selection of action possibilities. For example, do responsibilising-disciplining attitudes become attractive for professionals when conditions 1) cause insecurity and 2) there is no perceived better and simultaneously feasible alternative?

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