What is the contribution of the systems theory to a social work discipline and practice?

Social work as a discipline and as a profession needs one domain which will distinguish it from other professions.

Currently, within the social work theory and practice in Europe, especially in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark and Italy, exists a very popular approach based on the theory of social systems as developed by Niklas Luhmann. This theory is supposed to provide a basis for a specific social work domain.

Within the theory of Niklas Luhmann „social systems … consist of communications and nothing but communications – not of human beings, not of conscious mental states, not of roles, not even of actions. They produce and reproduce communications by meaningful reference to communications“ (Luhmann 1987, 113). There are so many realities as observers, for every one of these is “a construction of an observer for other observers”. There is no objective truth. The individual relates only to his own constructs and is not a member of the society and is being included or excluded depending on functional needs of the various social systems.

Social systems are autopoietic (self-organizing), self-referential, and autonomous, or impervious to external stimuli.

In the light of the theory of Niklas Luhmann social work can be seen as a specific method of communication which has the aim to identify the reasons for necessary and legitimate help (Bommes. & Scherr 2000, 131). Social work is within this theoretical framework limited in its autonomy since it depends largely on social-political resource allotments.

Regarding to the question of social work and control the Luhmanns scholars in German social work Bommes & Scherr (2000, 45) are emphasizing that only those can be helped who are willing and able to be controlled. What is a legitimate reason for help is defined by legal regulations.

Social work is providing assistance for conformation with the society rules.

Another Luhmanns scholar Baecker (1994) points out that there is no direct intervention in social work. Every success of a social work intervention is a result of a self-adapting of the problematic system.
In my opinion many scholars who embrace this theory are distancing themselves from the objectivistic understanding of social problems and limit themselves to analyse merely the communicative (media and political) construction of social problems. The constrains of this theoretical framework are evident, since this approach limits itself to descriptions of theoretical strategies and does not provide a sufficient explanation towards better understanding of social problems and developing strategies to their resolution. The results of an empirical study based on the analyses of the social problems of immigrants in Germany show that Luhmann’s theory proves itself inadequate for the social work practice and diminishes the role of the social work profession. In this study (Klassen 2003) empirical evidences for the real and not medial constructed existence of social problems of the migrants were found. Some of these problems (unemployment, bad living conditions, domestic violence) are impacting others and therefore are not “construction of an observer for other observers”. As for the autonomy of social work, social workers who have been interviewed are emphasizing that their decisions are primarily based on professional knowledge and skills. In case social-political resource allotments do not allow to take specific actions some creative ways to implement professional social work decisions are sought. Considering the question of social work and control we found out that also those migrants who are not willing and able to be controlled can be helped. Some legal regulations which according to Luhmann (1997a, 1997b) are supposed to provide a legitimate reason for social work practice are against social and human rights of migrants and therefore to be opposed instead of complying with them like it is required in the UN-Manual (1992). In the study completed it was found, that there is a direct intervention in social work. Further, this intervention is often necessary, in order to prevent further damage (e.g. in case of domestic violence).

But why is this theory so popular among the social science scholars and the field social workers? For social work academics its complex and abstract structure promises to equip social work theory with a scientific fundament needed to be accepted in the scientific community of social sciences. On the other hand, for some social work professionals the implementation of Luhmann’s theory is an easy way to abandon all responsibility for social work action since according to the approach of Luhmann a direct intervention into a system is not possible so that the consequences of social work action can neither be regulated nor foreseen (Staub-Bernasconi 2002).

However, there is no need to abolish completely a systemic perspective in social work. There are alternatives that do not demand so many serious and unprovable assumptions as the Luhmann’s theory does. One of these alternatives is the theory of social systems as developed by Mario Bunge (1996, 1998). This approach seems to be a more appropriate systemic view within the theoretical and practical fields of social work due to its ontological description and explanation of the processes relating to the fields of social work.
Bunge (1996, 20f.) defines a system as follows: "a complex object, which parts and components are connected with other parts of the same object in a way that the whole has some characteristics, which are missing by its components - emergent properties". In the sociological context the concept of system used by Bunge is described as follows: "A social system is a concrete system, which is composed by social animals. These animals (a) share a common environment and (b) interact with others members of the system in cooperative way ... . A human social system is a social system which is composed of a human beings and their artifacts" (Bunge 1996, 271).

References:


