

Urban Nothdurfter

Department of Sociology and Social Research
Doctoral School in Comparative Social Work
University of Trento, Italy
urban.nothdurfter2@unibz.it

The local understanding of policy paradigms in the field of occupational integration of disadvantaged youth and its implications on social work practice

The background for the PhD proposal is given by the analysis of the social work profession in its historical and sociopolitical genesis, which shows that from its origins social work has always been intertwined with the sphere of social policy and which points out that social work as a profession remains committed to both the political agenda and the private needs in the sphere of civil society. This dual dependency and the persistent tension between the public and the private sphere are the characteristics which identify social work as a social profession, which is always linked to the way in which society defines welfare and organizes solidarity (Lorenz 2006). Such an approach conceives social work as a reflective practice (Fook 2002) which has a crucial significance in developing new forms of solidarity and in shaping those spaces and processes in which social policy strategies and people's needs meet up. Strategies of social policy depend in their effects and in their legitimacy on their "fine tuning" (Lorenz 2006, p. 44) in the micro processes which decide over inclusion or exclusion from social citizenship (Lorenz 2006) and on their precise direction achieved in the implementation in different contexts of welfare arrangements and local social work practices (Sheppard 2006). Social work is placed in the frontline of those micro processes and derives from this specific position, its sociopolitical dimension and its sociopolitical mandate.

Social work debates mainly agree that the welfare state which has led to the development and the expansion of modern social work has significantly changed or – as some scholars even sustain – is disappearing in his traditional form (Bütow/Chassé/Hirt 2008, Kessl/Otto 2009). Comparative research on welfare state change is mainly done by quantitative macro level analysis. While quantitative and macro level research on welfare change mainly confirms the stability of the "big picture" pointing out the resistance and the seemingly stable surface of national welfare states (Hudson/Kühner 2009, Starke/Obinger/Castles 2008, Kühner 2007), local social policy has received little attention in the research field, although the local level plays a decisive role in the process of welfare state restructuring by developing new institutional arrangements and new combinations of policies (Schridde 2002). Local social policy and the concrete implementation of social policy reforms gain in importance primarily because of the inherent ambivalence of the tendencies in social policy development, which is given as a result of the fundamental ambivalence of actual social conditions, under which social policy has to be developed (Lorenz 2005). Social policy research must therefore combine quantitative findings and macro level research with more disaggregated analyses of individual social policy domains on the national level and with detailed local case studies combining

quantitative and qualitative research methods to study policy outcomes on the local level and to provide information about what happens on the level where policy strategies become concrete and meet up with people's needs. In such a prospective social work research can provide a specific contribution, especially concerning social work's allocation in the new local welfare scenarios and the impact of social policy reforms to social work practice.

The proposal for the PhD-project will concentrate on the local interpretations of paradigms in current social policy development and their implications on social work practice. At this aim the project will focus on the local implementation and interpretation of activation policies in the field of occupational integration of disadvantaged youth. Young people are seen as the most promising target group in the climate of investment oriented, productive welfare (Olk 2009) and they are distinctively exposed to contemporary economic, social, political and institutional crises, which significantly change the relationship between work, identity and social life and with it established ideas of time, age and generation (Clarke 2008). The empirical part of the project will consist in a comparative case study in the field of occupational integration of disadvantaged youth in two local realities of two different European countries. It will analyze policy programs and regulatory framework as well as institutional settings and working concepts in the field. A special attention will be drawn to the interpretations of the activation paradigm given by frontline social workers and to the implications of activation policies on social work practice and on social work's relation with its clients. The research will combine different methods of qualitative research.