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Categorising work: The construction of clients by social work professionals of child and youth welfare services

In the context of social work 'new' debates on professionalisation started in Germany in the 1980s (cp. Kraul, Marotzki & Schweppe 2002, 7). In contrast to 'old' debates focusing on the position of social work within the system of professions, 'new' discussions emphasise the internal structures of professional action including antinomies and paradoxical aspects.

One antinomy being stressed by different authors is the antinomy of subsum(p)tion and reconstruction (cp. Oevermann 1996, 126; Helsper 2000, 145; Schütze 1992, 147) meaning the dilemma to necessarily use categories to classify the case on the one hand and to cope with the singularity of the case on the other hand.

The activity constituting this dilemma is categorisation that analytically regarded needs a point of reference. To draw on the argumentation of Juhila, Pösö, Hall & Parton (cp. 2003, 11) the client has been chosen as the point of reference because he or she "is at the core of social work" (11) which means that the basis of social work and other human service professions "lies in the actors who use and need them" (11) and therefore justifies the existence of these professions.

Although these considerations underline the relevance of categorising work with regard to the client done by social work professionals hardly any empirical research can be found concerning that subject matter at least in the German context.

To reduce this research gap the dissertation project aims to explore how social work professionals construe clients by categorisation.

A method granting access to these processes is the Repertory Grid Technique (cp. Kelly 1955), a structured interview method inviting the interviewees to make categorisations with regard to a certain subject of discussion (clients in the presented study).

Although a quantifying analysis of repertory grid data represents the dominant practice of research it will be methodologically argued within the dissertation project that the interviews carried out with social work professionals will be interpreted using the qualitative research procedure of sequential analysis oriented in a hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (cp. Hitzler, Reichertz & Schröer 1999; Soeffner 1999, 2004).

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