

DFG Research Training Group 2493

Between User-focused and Impact Research: Consequences of Social Services Work (short: Consequences of Social Services Work)

Sketch

Key Research Idea

Modern societies use extensive resources to help people change and improve their living conditions. They should commit fewer crimes, achieve educational certifications, expand their social skills, overcome social isolation, consume less alcohol, experience less discrimination, etc. Social services work should support these processes. However, it is unclear to what extent it will succeed. The Research Training Group assumes that the question of the consequences of social services work and an orientation towards its addressees must be considered together. People follow routines and selfunderstandings that have been established biographically and are embedded in complex social constellations. People set their own goals, which do not always correspond to the politically and technically given goals of social support.

At present it is a central interdisciplinary task to combine different research approaches with the constitutive and specific orientation of social services work towards its addressees. Against this background, the aim of the Research Training Group is to investigate consequences in the field of social services work in their various facets and manifestations, including unintended consequences and unwanted side effects, with reference to their addressees. In order to achieve this aim, the Research Training Group will bring to bear various disciplinary approaches and heterogeneous methodological and theoretical approaches to research the consequences of social services work. In particular, social-pedagogical, psychological and sociological approaches are used to conceive and rethink different forms of consequence research depending on the views and practices of addressees.

In the sense of research oriented towards addressees of social services work, we speak of "consequence research". In the Research Training Group, this field of research is to be contoured and established in an interdisciplinary research context. The combination of social-pedagogical, psychological and sociological research will enable doctoral candidates to explore specific types of consequence research and their justifications as well as to develop their own approach to

consequence research. Not only in German-speaking countries, but also in international research contexts, there has been a lack of a correspondingly oriented, interdisciplinary research networks that explicitly take a multiperspective approach to consequence research, combine existing research approaches and establish novel perspectives for this purpose. Different disciplinary approaches as well as different methodological approaches come together here.

Social Services Work and Its Addressees: The Research Field

There is currently no interdisciplinary uniform understanding of social services work. However, constitutive commonalities can be cited. On the one hand, these are measures that are supposed to have a positive effect on people (or on groups of people) in the sense of an expansion of opportunities for participation and options for action. On the other hand, there is a commonality in the form of special support services, since the social participation opportunities of the addressees are in question. We therefore speak of social services work as institutions which are committed to a socio-pedagogical or psychosocial intervention logic and which seek to meet special need for support in order to achieve positive effects for the addressees and, associated with this, also for society.

Different fields of practice are assigned to social services work. Examples include child and youth welfare, intercultural work and work related to migration, support for people with disabilities, clinical social work, care for the elderly, drug and addiction help, social services of the judiciary, help for the homeless, women's shelters, unemployment counselling, community work, certain forms of psychotherapy and other forms of assistance. In addition to differentiations based on the age of the addressees or certain types of support, attempts to systemize social services work refer to the degree of intervention used to intervene in the living conditions of addressees. Since no consensus has yet been reached on this point, we base the Research Training Group on the orientation described above towards the social-pedagogical or psycho-social intervention logic in the case of particular needs. We deliberately speak of "social services work" in order to employ an interdisciplinary, largely neutral reference term that emphasizes the intention of assistance for addressees.

Social services work is a sometimes farreaching intervention in the lives of a growing number of people. Research on the corresponding consequences should therefore be broadly researched, whereby current developments and changes – e.g. the digitization or medialization of social environments and the increasing relevance of migration issues – must be taken into account. An orientation towards addressees must consider current forms of living and take heterogeneous, complex life constellations seriously.

Orientation towards Addressees as a Characteristic of Social Services Work

In contrast to the currently heterogeneous options of researching the consequences of social services work, the Research Training Group takes a specific starting point: consequences must be determined with reference to the specifics of social services work. The orientation towards addressees is of decisive relevance in this respect for the following reasons:

- a) *From a legal point of view*, the Social Code (SGB) VIII defines the task of involving addressees in the decision on assistance and in its implementation (§§ 5, 8, 36 SGB VIII; using the example of child and youth welfare). In corresponding consultations pursuant to § 36 (1) SGB VIII, “the possible consequences for the development of the child or adolescent” must also be taken into account. When making decisions on assistance procedures, professionals must inform a child, a young person or their parents, orient themselves to their needs and take into account the consequences of any measures to be implemented. Measures against the will of those involved are possible in individual forms of help, but they require special professional and legal legitimation, especially with regard to the welfare of the child. Other relevant legal provisions with an explicit participation requirement refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- b) *From an empirical point of view*, social services work is essentially shaped by the activities, special characteristics and specific circumstances of the addressees. Research on the effects of child and youth welfare, for example, points to the empirically high importance of active participation by the addressees. Their living conditions, motivation and activities make a decisive contribution to the consequences and success of measures. The activation of resources, the guarantee of participation and the principle of helping people to help themselves is highly relevant in social services work.
- c) *From a theoretical point of view*, there are very different reasons why help should be provided in orientation to the addressees. In socio-pedagogical approaches like “life world orientation” (“Lebensweltorientierung”), this claim is constitutive. Its core refers to the planning, implementation and reflection of social services work in recourse to the interpretations and actions as well as to the living conditions of the addressees. Further theoretical offers with a similarly strong focus on addressees include user research (“Nutzerinnen- und Nutzerforschung”), research on use (“Nutzungsforschung”), narrative approaches and agency-related positions.
- d) *In normative terms*, the guiding principle of child and youth welfare is the right of every young person “to the promotion of his or her development and to education to become a responsible personality capable of participating in community life” (§ 1 para. 1 SGB VIII). Professional ethical positions share this focus. Orientation towards addressees also includes guaranteeing options for participation and contradiction in important decisions. In addition to the advocacy

representation of the interests of addressees, it is obligatory that they can articulate their own views and call for alternatives to professional decisions. For normative assessments of social services work, this implies the important consequence that the subjective views of addressees cannot go unnoticed.

According to these points, the orientation towards addressees embodies the key criterion in the provision of social services work. The doctoral research projects of the Research Training Group must be committed to research practice that is able to do equal justice to both general basic questions of consequence research and this distinctiveness of social services work.

Five central Questions

The state of research on social services work points to a considerable heterogeneity in the way in which its consequences are researched and understood. The following five key questions are of central importance for the Research Training Group:

- 1) *How can consequences of social services work be conceptualized?*
- 2) *How do consequences emerge?*
- 3) *How are users involved in the constitution of consequences?*
- 4) *How can consequences be researched methodologically and methodically?*
- 5) *How does social services work interact with the identity of users?*

These are complex questions that are independent of individual disciplinary and methodological positions. The five central questions reflect the inner context of the Research Training Group. They serve the communication between the doctoral candidates. For the research process, a constant examination of the central questions is fundamental.

For literature references see the homepage of the Research Training Group:
www.folgensozialerhilfen.de

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