

DFG Research Training Group 2493

## The Consequences of Social Services between Service Users' Views and Expected Impact

Social services are politically and publicly legitimised by their objectives to the extent that they are seen as bringing about improvements regarding the specific problems and opportunities in the life of service users. For instance, social services may be intended to broaden people's options for social participation, help them cope with difficult life situations, or provide an infrastructure supporting the development of children and young people. These objectives are stipulated in social policy and by law and specified in the policies of support institutions.

In view of this policy orientation of social services, RTG 2493 starts by asking what the actual consequences of social services are. The results of the first stage of research show not only that the observed consequences often far differ from the institutional objectives of such services, but also illustrate the complex requirements of researching consequences. The perspective and research methodology adopted have an influence on the specific consequences that can be identified. Making unplanned consequences apparent requires an open approach to research and research designs taking this openness into account (Dollinger & Weinbach 2020; Weinbach et al. 2017). Moreover, consequences may be assessed differently from the point of view of service users, practitioners, funding bodies or researchers. The normative or ethical reference points must be observed and justified in each case, taking into account that the assessment of consequences may change over time (Dollinger 2020a): some consequences are immediately evident in the situations in which help is provided, others only become apparent in retrospect in service users' biographical stories, which may change their assessment (Rajah et al. 2014).

To be able to respond to this apparent complexity and conditionality of determining consequences, more extensive basic research will be required. This is to be carried out in RTG 2493 in the second stage of funding. As in the first stage, this research will, in its open approach, differ from established impact and evaluation research, which is usually aimed at assessing the effects of institutionally stipulated measures. It will also go beyond user research (Schaarschuch & Oelerich 2005) and research into how social services are used or not used (Bareis 2012), because its primary focus is not on the usefulness or utility value of such services.

For its research into consequences to address fundamental issues, to be open to complex interactions, yet to remain structured, RTG 2493 will continue to focus on five key questions providing the researchers with a framework for designing and carrying out their research projects. These key questions will ensure that all projects are designed as research into consequences, are in dialogue with each other, and contribute to further developing this approach to researching consequences. The questions from the first stage have largely been confirmed by the research results to date; in part, their focus has been slightly modified for the second stage:

First, in the interest of an open approach, it is necessary to determine *to which social contexts the consequences can be ascribed*. Within each project, researching consequences should be done in a way that not only records different consequences, not limited to institutionally stipulated impacts, but also determines the causes of these consequences. The fundamental assumption is that it is precisely the unintended consequences of social services that arise in the complex social contexts in which social

services are embedded.

Second, it must be assumed that the consequences of social services *are substantially (co)produced by service users* (Oelerich & Schaarschuch 2013; Schaarschuch 2006; Schaarschuch & Oelerich 2005; also Bitzan & Bolay 2013; Großhoff 2013). By gathering data on service users' practices and attributions of meaning, among other things, we will seek to identify how service users contribute to specific consequences emerging from social services or in the context of their provision.

Third, exploring various consequences will require applying a wide range of *research methods* in RTG 2493. For instance, narrative interviews will make it possible to analyse consequences in service users' biographies and self-presentations, while ethnographic observations can capture the consequences of everyday routines and practices. Finally, using statistical analysis, patterns and trends in relations between various factors can be identified, assessed and compared, and the strength of these relations quantified.

Fourth, we need to ask *in what way consequences can be attributed causally to individual measures*. The dialogue between different research traditions and their implications for theorising causality is a special feature of RTG 2493, reinforced by its interdisciplinary structure. Socio-educational, sociological and psychological research use heterogeneous disciplinary and sub-disciplinary conceptions of causality, which are of constitutive importance in substantiating consequences (Clark/Dollinger/Heppchen 2024; Dollinger 2018).

The fifth key question addresses *how social services interact with the identity of service users*. The results of RTG 2493 so far show very clearly that social services do indeed have an impact on the identity of service users. When receiving help, service users are confronted with different available identities and constraints on identity. There are different ways of theorising over this, e.g. by focussing on the creation of identities in interactions (Bamberg 2012), on how service users are addressed in social work (Richter 2010), or on positioning (Deppermann 2015).

Our work during the first funding stage has shown that the dialogue in RTG 2493 based on these key questions provides researchers with the best conditions for developing, refining and justifying their own approaches to research into consequences. This has been confirmed, among other things, by the extremely positive response that the perspective of researching consequences has received at various national and international conferences, during international visits by individual researchers and in publications (for details, see the researchers' individual reports and the work and results report).

The senior researchers responsible for implementing this programme represent a diverse, interdisciplinary spectrum of different perspectives with regard to the key questions and the overall framework of RTG 2493. They have different theoretical foundations and their research methods use a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Their broad expertise in various areas of social services should also be highlighted: child and youth care (Clark), help in the school context (Coelen), support for delinquents (Dollinger), support in digital networks and digitised support (Hoffmann), help with improving communication skills and dealing with psychological and physical aggression (Kastenmüller), psychotherapy (Klucken), volunteering and services for migrants (Munsch), and support for people with disabilities (Rohrmann and Weinbach). Given this broad expertise, the applicants are well placed to implement the RTG 2493 programme and to provide comprehensive guidance and advice to the junior researchers.

The second stage of RTG 2493 is to focus on and refine two perspectives in particular: First, a more intense focus will be placed on *unintended* consequences of social services,

as this will provide new insights into social services. The focus will thus be on consequences beyond the policy objectives of the institutions providing support. The projects presented demonstrate that this focus brings into view consequences that have so far received little attention but are of particular relevance to service users. In this context, it will also be necessary to ask from which perspective are certain objectives associated with a given kind of support.

Second, the importance of the *social contexts* in which social services are embedded is to be more clearly emphasised in the second stage, the hypothesis being that unintended consequences arise in a particular way in these social contexts. Social services are part of complex societal arrangements and cannot be reduced to a mere working relationship between professionals and service users. For instance, service users are forced to deal with labels attached to them; the social situation of the service users is also important, and the specific settings in which help is provided must also be taken into account. What is innovative about this proposed extension is that the consequences of social services will be systematically researched in their social contexts using the research programme described.

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