

# Preface

Bozen-Bolzano University Press is honored to present this volume dedicated to the life achievements of Dr. Edward Joseph Mullen, an outstanding international scholar in the field of social work. It celebrates his work through contributions by distinguished social work academics from six countries, each of whom present a different slant on Ed Mullen's lifelong concern for developing a scientific grounding for social work practice. This book culminates in Ed Mullen's own compendium of his approach to the profession of social work.

As a small university that came into existence in 1997 and situated on the geographical borders between Italy and Austria and the cultural intersection of Northern and Southern European traditions, the University of Bozen-Bolzano welcomes this opportunity to publicize our particular approach to social work research and education implicitly through the medium of this volume. When we hosted the Inter-Centre Network for Evaluation of Social Work Practice (INTSOCEVAL) seminar in 2014, we had the opportunity to measure our approach against contributions by the finest international researchers in the discipline of social work, among them Ed Mullen himself. This confirmed our conviction that, first of all, social work has earned its place in academia, although this is still not yet accepted in all countries; it merits this position not because it emulates other disciplines but because it is developing its own characteristic discourse. Such a discourse combines dedication to the immediacy of social issues arising especially at the local level, the critical reception of empirical studies, and rigorous theories and science-based methods of international and universal relevance. Social work is a discipline and profession situated on the frontlines, in positions in which differences matter and their meaning and significance need to be constantly negotiated. In many countries our belonging to the

world of academia and the community of recognized professions is still a matter of contention, but as this volume demonstrates, emanating from contributions to the INTSOCEVAL seminar, this constitutes a challenge that produces excellent scholarship and reflects this very specialty of social work.

Academics like Haluk Soydan, whose skilled editorship and international erudition steered this publication to its impressive conclusion, are themselves examples of the stimulating and integrating effects of scholarly exchange across borders, as he describes in his introduction. I myself shared similar experiences, having traversed several European borders. My background of undergraduate studies in theology in Germany was always a much appreciated basis for a deeper understanding of and respect for the irresolvable questions arising in social work practice, whereas following this up with studies in social policy and social work at postgraduate level at the London School of Economics added to this analytic competence concerning structural social questions and methodological options in social work. Together with several years of practice at the coal face in London's East End community, a laboratory of social diversity of every kind and a source of inspiration stemming from the resilience of my clients, this background equipped me to venture into teaching social work in the Republic of Ireland, where in the 1970s and 1980s much social pioneering work was to be done. Living and working in a country undergoing a dramatic transformation, I discovered the value of approaching social work from a historical perspective. Any attempt at imposing a methodology from the assumption that it was universally and timelessly valid would simply not have connected with the cultural and political specificities of Ireland, a country much more heterogeneous than common stereotypes suggest. This realization in turn shaped the engagement I was drawn into after 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, where I was invited to participate in numerous resurrections of social work (and social pedagogy) courses after the demise of communism. Searching for the many traces of forms under which social work had been present, even under conditions that had denied its relevance, and combining them with the knowledge derived from studying how social work had originated in other historical contexts led me to discover the specificity of

social work theory. It helped me to promote the approach to social work research we now practice here in Italy at Bozen.

The deep political partition I experienced in divided postwar Germany; the divisions, superficially characterized as religious differences, I had experienced in Ireland; and the linguistic differences of the borderline Italian province of South Tyrol, which founded and finances our university as a multilingual project, added another dimension to my understanding of the role of social work. It *does* make a difference in which language you practice your profession, and the difference it makes cannot be learned from books but only from the people with whom you interact and to whom you dedicate your professional work. And so the exchanges between teachers and learners, theoreticians and practitioners, professionals and users of services are vital for the promotion of accountable forms of practice and, by the same token, for practice research in social work. The conference held by the European Social Work Research Association in conjunction with the INTSOCEVAL seminar in Bozen, which was also addressed by Ed Mullen, bore witness to the relevance of this approach to social work research.

Ed Mullen's presence and particularly the presentation of his particular understanding of what should count as evidence in pursuit of evidence-based practice (EBP) in social work, which he centrally helped to promote, gave credence to the validity of research approaches to social work that do not carry out research *on* users of social services but regard them as coproducers of knowledge. It was most inspiring to experience the vibrancy of this trans-Atlantic debate on our doorstep and to witness the confidence that is spreading among social work researchers on account of a vision of accountable practice that overcomes the stagnant controversies between positivists and constructivists that had long stymied fruitful exchanges between both camps.

Having led us to this fruitful stage of an inescapable debate is one of the latest contributions by Ed Mullen and his colleagues from the other side of the Atlantic. Through such exchanges we notice how insular our scientific

communities still are and how isolating linguistic boundaries continue to be, even within the academic communities of Europe where opportunities for linguistic encounters should be plentiful. My own observations are that within the academic discipline of social work we oscillate between a superficial type of universalism, often parading as scientific neutrality, on one side—an attitude that pretends that people are people and social work, despite its different titles and traditions, can claim a scientific basis for its interventions that transcends cultural barriers and political ideologies—and an overemphasis on the significance of historically grown differences in titles and schools of thought on the other. A prime example of this ambiguity in Europe is the duality between discourses of social work and social pedagogy, which is hard to explain to outsiders but which can nevertheless be used either to put up barriers to mutual understanding or level all differences to the point where the critical mutual questioning this implies is lost.

This volume was therefore deliberately designed as an experiment in border crossing in the best tradition of academic critique, which does not take any position for granted but seeks to obtain truth from the careful examination of the evidence provided to back up arguments. The wide range of national responses to EBP presented here do not converge but have nevertheless a common concern, which is to communicate the link between evidence and accountability in social work. Following the evidence orientation is therefore not a matter of joining a confessional community as it sometimes appears but an invitation to link research and practice in social work to promote more fruitful exchanges for the purpose of facing up to social work's deep social and ethical responsibility.

The experiment at the core of this volume is an attempt to connect the views and experiences of academic colleagues from different national backgrounds who are prepared to question their insights regarding intellectual border crossings. That this book could be produced by the publishing house of this young university is a sign of the confidence our international partners have in the quality of this university's overall work and in that of our colleagues

in social work at Brixen, who have launched this series and whose stimulating academic projects I am happy to share. It certainly constitutes a landmark in the series of Brixen Studies in Social Policy and Social Science, in which this volume appears, and underlines our dual commitment to regional research issues and international debates.

As rector of this university, I take courage in witnessing how my discipline of social work, which is certainly not prominently represented among heads of universities and which still has the reputation of being marginal in academia, can in a work such as this demonstrate not only its own international presence and high rank, but also the general role of a university as an educational and cultural institution that critically connects different positions on a global scale and sees therein its social commitment.

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