

# European Dimensions of Social Work Education: Optional or Essential?

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To discuss the merits of European dimensions for social work at the trilingual Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and on the occasion of celebrating 20 years of a model of social work education that has arisen from European collaboration and is promoted by academics with an explicit European orientation, seems like carrying coal to Newcastle (or Eulen nach Athen, to use the German expression in this multi-lingual context).

When exactly 20 years ago I learned through friends and colleagues in our European networks, which had stretched back to the early 1980s, that social work education had become a reality at this new university, I found this a most exciting development and a unique opportunity. We had all been part of a network, the European Centre for Community Education (ECCE), instigated by Friedrich Seibel and colleagues at the Fachhochschule Koblenz, Germany, and were enthusiastic about the possibilities of re-claiming social work's international and European orientation. This network preceded even the beginning of the ERASMUS programme and had designed and promoted European exchanges, intensive seminars and position papers on exactly the topic of how European dimensions could be incorporated into "ordinary" social work study programmes to enable students and staff to participate actively in the formation of a "social Europe". ECCE even offered a certificate, the ACCESS certificate, to students who had completed modules and placements at various partner universities across Europe that had already begun in their various ways to point out the importance of approaching social work from a European perspective. These initiatives sought to introduce changes in this direction against the background of well-established academic course programmes, whereas in Brixen there was the opportunity to put those ideas to

the test in the context of a completely new beginning and to create an entire study programme oriented towards European dimensions. What appeared to be particularly promising was the linguistic aspect of this location because the plurality of languages in that part of Italy promised to open up links in research and practice in different European directions. Furthermore, at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Brixen there was to be found a group of pioneering scholars with a specific interest in languages, in addition to their competences in their respective disciplines, who were prepared to carry forward this European concept concretely.

But when joining the project and becoming professor at this faculty in 2001, I had to realise what it actually meant, putting those ideas to the test. The test was – and continues to be – confronting a fundamental dilemma that characterises social work since its very beginnings as a profession and an academic discipline: How to reconcile the claim to being a full profession and a discipline, endorsed by a form of knowledge base that has international status and universal scientific validity on account of its culture-independent character, with the necessity to ground the ensuing practice competence in specific national, political, cultural and social contexts in which service users live and in which concrete social problems arise. This dilemma was confounded by the fact that on the one hand in Italy, all academic curricula are rather narrowly prescribed by the national ministry of education in Rome, but on the other hand the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano is financed by the Autonomous Province of Bozen-Bolzano with the justified expectation that the university honours its duty to the funder and trains social workers, as it is obliged to do for school teachers, for work specifically in this territory and not for “export” to other parts of Italy or to other countries. How can cultural specificity be reconciled with universal validity?

This situation however echoes the dilemma which the pioneers of social work had long recognised as an opportunity to define thereby the nature of social work’s professionalism more generally. Without the international contacts and networks of women like Jane Addams in the USA, who was awarded the Peace Nobel Prize in 1931 for having founded the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in 1919, and for her commitment to get the great powers to disarm and conclude peace agreements, like Alice Salomon in Germany, Alice Masarykova in Czechoslovakia, or Helena

Radlinska in Poland the First International Conference of Social Work in Paris could not have come about in 1928, a conference which brought together some 5000 participants. The internationalism of these women was fired by their various forms of engagement in the women's and the peace movements or through other commitments to international social causes. In all these activities and exchanges they expressed their opposition to the narrow nationalism that came to dominate European politics in those fateful years before and after WW I and whose discriminating and conflict-enhancing effects we still feel today in many parts of Europe. These pioneers aimed pragmatically at making social work rise above those national parameters and sought to prevent social workers from becoming "civil servants", servants of a particular social policy system (Kniephoff-Knebel & Seibel, 2008). The cross-border activities by these women were all the more remarkable as Europe was politically engaged in coming to terms with and consolidating the new national boundaries that the Paris conference of 1919 and the subsequent Treaties of Versailles and Trianon had drawn. On the part of the countries defeated in that war this left a deep sense of loss and resentment, combined with a feeling that those national boundaries are unfair and have to be revised, although the rationale for a revision is in most cases elusive. In this sense, the situation in Südtirol is by no means unique where many still lament the division of the Land Tirol, and this is repeated for instance in Hungary where there is a strong political demand to "revise" the effects of the Treaty of Trianon which had "truncated" the country. In Northern Ireland the division of the island has caused decades of civil war and has become a renewed cause of conflict in the negotiations over the UK's Brexit. Spain has been disrupted by the independence movements of the Basque and the Catalan provinces, Czechoslovakia was actually split up after 1989 into the separate states of the Czech and Slovakian Republic and the war in former Yugoslavia is perhaps the most terrible example in Europe of an unresolved settlement along ethnic or nationalistic lines. The determined international efforts of this committed group of social workers resulting from the Paris conference were brutally interrupted by Nazism and Fascism, which committed social workers to discriminatory and racist national social policies of the worst and most lethal kind because social workers were also drawn into the machinery of distinguishing

the “worthy” and the “unworthy” citizens with their diagnostic role to determine what constituted “lebensunwertes Leben”.

After WW II a very different kind of internationalism prevailed in Western Europe: International aid programmes organised by the UN, the USA and the UK sought to “re-educate” those parts of Europe that had succumbed to nationalist totalitarianism, and one of those political education strategies was to spread democracy through social work principles and practices. Case work, group work and community work were declared as constituting the standard model of social work with emphasis on the value-neutrality of its scientific foundation and its democratic orientation through the principle of self-determination which pervaded all three.

But by the 1970s and 80s the suspicion was raised by various protest movements that behind some of the post-war measures aimed at democratising European societies lurked the spectre of hegemonic political interests by a Western political alliance that had formed NATO and was dominated by the USA. In the wake of these movements, exemplified by the Anti-Vietnam-War movement but also the civil rights movement, the seeming neutrality of the casework model was also called into question. It became clear that the support for social work within Western models of the welfare state was part of a political agenda that placed the capitalist welfare system in direct competition with “really existing socialism” in Central and Eastern Europe. This questioning, combined with a growing critique of the power contained in scientific narratives generally and their support for established expert systems, was taken up by a series of other social movements, like the women’s and the black liberation movements. They asserted the importance of distinct cultural, ethnic and gender identities instead and insisted on the right and the power of people to define their own identity and needs.

Our European activities in the area of social work education through ECCE fell right into that period of the re-assertion of identity as an important issue for the discipline and the profession. It became clear in the course of these initial European exchanges that it was no longer sufficient to construct approaches in social work that operated with the formula “people are people” everywhere, at all times and in every culture, a formula which had been intended to counteract discrimination. Instead, one began to realise how important it was to respect that people had distinct individual and collective

identities, that cultural and ethnic attributes could not simply be ignored. It became apparent that it mattered for instance whether black children were being fostered with black parents rather than just with parents that were deemed to have excellent parenting qualities irrespective of their ethnic or cultural identity or that it was impossible to have male social workers deal with women who had suffered domestic violence. This was also the period when “indigenous” discourses in the social professions re-emerged and had to be taken into account in the attempts of making international comparisons meaningful. Most prominent in this respect was the case of social pedagogy which represented a kind of “standard model of social work” in Germany but the title appeared incomprehensible at first to our UK colleagues who associated pedagogy with teaching. It was not until a lively debate on the differences within the UK panorama of “social professions”, as we used to call them collectively, was explored that equivalent features were found for instance in youth work (which had a limited academic presence at that time) or that in Scotland the concept of community education was a close match and had its own longstanding tradition. We discovered furthermore that the Netherlands practised the methods of “androgogy” or simply “agogy” as one of quite a variety of versions of “the social professions”. These discoveries posed fundamental challenges to the seeming universality of the standard model of social work and caused considerable confusion at first, particularly since it seemed impossible to bring order into the bewildering array of titles describing various professional groups. What is more, these professionals were educated at very different academic levels in European countries. Even within countries, levels differed and not all of the training institutions offered the equivalent of university-level education so that access to PhD studies was not possible in every country. Furthermore, we found out that social workers were engaged in very different forms of practice within the different national social policy arrangements; in one case for instance, it meant being responsible for assessing people’s entitlement to social welfare payments whereas in another this was seen as having nothing to do with professional social work, or that in one country social workers worked directly with young people in residential settings or youth centres whereas in another they would only assess whether young people would benefit from contact with or residency in such settings.

The most challenging international development for our professions was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 which we commemorate exactly in the days of this symposium, only 10 years before the start of social work at the faculty in Brixen. To some Western social work observers, post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe appeared just like a tabula rasa on which (once more, like after the defeat of Nazism) a standard “Western” model of social work could or should be inscribed. I can say with some pride that our ECCE group and all those associated with it vehemently opposed this view, precisely on the basis of our historical interests and orientation (Friesenhahn et al., 2007). This had brought us to the realisation that not only had social work existed in most of those Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC), and this in often vibrant forms, before communist ideology declared all forms of social work as superfluous or directly inimical to the goals of socialism, but also that under Communism forms of social work were indeed being practised, sometimes against great opposition and with considerable personal risks. In the case of Hungary for instance, plans for the implementation of social work training at university level were ready in 1988 as the result of a series of consultations among sociologists like Zsuzsa Ferge and Western trained social workers like Gabor Hegyesi. We agreed with our partners in CEEC that the reconstruction process of study programmes should be critically linked to those traditions and that the learning opportunities from those analyses served in both directions, East and West. In many places in Central Eastern Europe this view of social work as a collection of diverse professional models resonated even though some partners would have wished that social work would have seized the opportunity of a new beginning to give itself a more coherent and hence a politically more convincing and powerful appearance. As it happened, the scene of the social professions in post-communist countries came to broadly resemble the situation in the West: social workers are just one profession among many other social professionals operating under various titles, they train at various academic levels and have very different practice functions and responsibilities (Hering, 2017).

But the value of European exchanges is not exhausted with stating these facts. We need to go further and relate these to the particular history of this continent and the significance of its cultural diversity, to see whether unifying aspects can be developed out of this realisation.

This is why these experiences and exchanges posed the questions with renewed urgency, wherein consists the European dimension of social work in view of this complicated history and this disunited situation? And what does this mean in terms of the identity of social work? From having been involved in a number of study programmes across Europe I can group my observations into basically three perspectives, leaving aside what I would call the “colonisers” who see Europe still as a kind of territory for missionaries that has to be brought to adopt the one definitive and only valid version of standard social work under a well-defined title and at best with a single professional association that zealously guards over the purity of that model. The other models are:

1. For some colleagues and academic institutions, European dimensions in social work are expressed in what amounts to a comparative approach. Here European exchanges are being actively pursued from a position of curiosity and openness. The orientation I detect in this group is one of saying, “how interesting that there is such a variety” and “perhaps we can learn and adopt one or the other idea from those explorations in our own context”. This approach corresponds to an attitude to cultural diversity that can be called multiculturalism – one celebrates the diversity of cultures, is tolerant against most of them, recognises but does not emphasise their relativity but is careful not to feel too threatened in one’s own identity and convictions by all this comparing. A telling example of this position evolved in the UK where a group of European-minded “indigenous” colleagues, aided by two German emigrants to Britain, have “discovered” social pedagogy through their continental visits. With that model they seek to promote the professionalisation of care workers in Britain who have so far been untrained or certainly not trained to professional level. The arrangements seem to suit everybody: social workers, who in the UK still largely pride themselves of representing the “true version” of social work in Europe (I have a British qualification of social work and know from the inside how this attitude prevails), do not feel threatened by that development because they regard this as a separate, emerging profession with its own methods and standards (even though there are some worries that social-pedagogically trained care workers might present competition for social workers as cheaper alternatives in areas not regulated by statu-

te); the government is happy because in this field training opportunities would otherwise not be likely to come about at the costly university level and social pedagogy training can be offered through in-service courses with special emphasis on the skills required in care settings; care workers themselves are happy because this finally gives them a professional identity and methodology (though largely as further development of what they have been doing already); and the academics are happy because it opens up additional posts and outlets for academic activities in a field in which there is constant demand. The question is, however, have these “imports” paid any attention to the historical and contemporary policy context in which the different versions of social pedagogy arose in continental Europe? And if this is being ignored, can the model therefore engage effectively - and critically - with the political context of the UK into which it is being inserted or does it take this context simply as given and concentrates instead on inter-personal skills? A reductionist “pick and choose” approach is always in danger of putting the emphasis on adaptation rather than transformation, which is one of the motivating principles behind social pedagogy in its fullest sense.)

2. A second version sees the European element of social work represented by an explicit reference to initiatives, programmes and opportunities stemming from policies of the European Union itself. In this perspective, social workers learn to appreciate European dimensions through paying attention to, for instance, funding schemes under the European Social Fund. Therefore, they will need to learn how to prepare successful applications for such funds, on the basis of their knowledge of the priorities expressed therein through EU policies. This is indeed an area of specialisation that is often under-utilised in social work because social workers have a limited knowledge of the somewhat indirect forms in which social policy is being pursued at European Union level in view of the national sensitivities associated with social policy matters. The fact is, that so far most EU member states are highly reluctant to delegate their sovereignty over social policies to the EU in the knowledge that in the area of social policy intricate value questions are actualised which cannot be generalised or “universalised”. This orientation towards European dimensions of social work usually leads to specialised modules or qualifications



at post-graduate or non-academic level and has rarely entered the mainstream curriculum (although the study programme at Brixen once contained such a module as an optional course taught by the first president of ECCE, Friedrich Seibel).

3. The third version uses European contacts, established through exchange visits or collaboration projects with European partners, as a means of developing expertise in social work areas that have an explicit European or international dimension in terms of the composition and needs of their clientele. Here two areas receive most attention, the area of international adoption which after 1989 became an issue focused more on Europe and this particularly in the light of the plight of orphans from the institutions of Romania, and more recently the area of migration. Social workers dealing with those fields require to have not just theoretical knowledge of international law or cultural traditions in other countries and among ethnic groups but competence in negotiating differences in traditions and legislation for the benefit of service users. This use of European dimensions again takes the form of a specialisation in preparation for those particular fields of work, although it is becoming increasingly useful to have those competences also in other areas such as general social services, mental health or general health settings where the number of service users from non-European countries has increased and intercultural competence is being demanded of all social workers.

All these three versions have found their place, to varying degrees, in parts of the curriculum of social work as it developed here at Brixen and demonstrated their relevance: these study programmes are well connected through ERASMUS to partner universities in many European countries, students learn to keep an eye on EU funding opportunities from which many regional projects are being financed, and through placements and exchanges they are well prepared to work in areas where migration has changed the composition of the service user group. And yet for us colleagues and our partners who had shared on the road towards the Europeanisation of the social work curriculum these three versions did not represent the full use of what can be gained from going deeper into the meaning of a European dimension for social work. Through a more thorough and systematic look at the linkages

between versions of social work and the development of common European ideas we began to realise that a European view of social work is not an optional extra but an essential part of understanding social work principally.

This gave the impetus for reflecting on a fourth, more comprehensive version of European social work that does not just integrate or make reference to specific elements of the curriculum that are explicitly earmarked as having a European character (Lorenz, 2017). Our ambition is to demonstrate that all elements of the social work curriculum must be seen in relation to how national forms of social work practice are part of a shared discourse on social solidarity that has its origins in the differentiation of European nation states and continues ever since in a variety of forms. If we leave out the complex intertwining of histories, experiences and discourses that make up a shared but never resolvable search for European identities we see different forms of practice merely in their relativity and contingency whereas they are relative to something common in all their fragmentation.

The difficulty of defining what constitutes a European identity is constitutive for this continent (Dittrich van Weringh, 2005). It is not the territory that can be used as a reference point for a European identity, because while the western boundary of Europe is relatively clearly defined by its Atlantic coastline, when we forget the status of various smaller (the Canaries) or bigger islands (Iceland, Greenland), the southern limits are already a mere convention of modernity. Countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea share a very important part of Europe's history and identity, of which the refugee dramas being acted out on that stretch of water in the recent decade are a painful reminder. And where Europe ends in an easterly direction is a matter of highly topical disputes, not just when considering a possible affiliation of Turkey to the European Union. Nor can our identity be defined in religious terms, even though Christianity in recent centuries played a dominant role after the decisive and violent ending of conflicts with Islam, yet Christianity is in itself highly divided in Eastern and Western Christianity and within the Western version quite a number of reformations split the unity with considerable consequences for political boundary-drawing. And in any case, religion in Europe has made many concessions to secularism in its many versions for good two centuries now. Language cannot be invoked either as a unifying element when even the roots of most European languages are summed up

in the term *Indo-Germanic*, which itself points beyond the eastern confines of Europe. There is therefore no “basis”, there is no shared “something” that can substantiate our European identity and what we are consequently left with is the continuous process of exploring and differentiating identities in their plurality, drawing boundaries, arguing over cultural values, setting ourselves in opposition to the whole world or trying to keep up with the attributes of globalisation. What Europeans share is not one thing, not a common origin, not even in anthropological terms when we follow the complex findings of palaeontology with ever new surprises concerning the “Out of Africa” hypothesis and the various insights into the role of the Neanderthals who appear now to be to a greater extent our forebearers than originally thought, let alone the countless waves of peoples’ migrations during and since the ending of the Roman Empire and the politics of colonialism.

Yet rather than these observations giving rise to the impossibility of defining a common European identity (White, 2012) they point instead at a much more productive and constructive conceptualisation of identities in human and social contexts. What appear as complications are instead to be regarded as the reference points for the general development of social identities, in individuals, in families, in social groups, in communities, in nations. While identity creation indeed must make reference to substantive elements arising from biology, climate, territory, rituals, power structures etc., these are in a constant state of flux and give rise to constantly changing meanings to the extent that those settling on a specific identity have to take position towards those given factors, examine them, adopt some aspects, reject others, meet new challenges and learn new ways of coping with them, and this over the entire life cycle of individuals – and also of nations. I would further hypothesise that we follow an entirely inappropriate path if we try to define European identity with reference to any such “givens”, whatever their nature might be defined as being. What Europeans share and what constitutes their various identities is a process that has taken historically, culturally, intellectually and politically a distinct course, again not distinct in isolation from processes in other parts of the world but resulting in what could with all caution therefore be called a common heritage. The encounter with diversity that characterises Europe in this sense is different from the encounters with diversity of for instance North America, where immigration and the violence

of encounters with indigenous peoples and with slaves also point towards a distinct process of identity formation, of African identity, where the encounter with diversity has again different facets, of which tribalism, climate and above all colonialism are prominent factors. Equally the Asian experience is distinct, if one can even talk of Asia as a coherent entity, an uncertainty to which we Europeans refer to with vague terms like *the Middle East* as against *the Far East*, a typically European perspective of course.

What I mean to say is that some of the specific traits of the encounter with diversity that can be found in European experiences have a deep and decisive significance for social work, because social workers are ultimately engaged in people's quest for identities, as family members, as members of contested groups, as citizens with uncertainties over their status and their rights of belonging. This is linked to one facet of the European experience which can be characterised with the term "enlightenment", which in turn triggered developments towards political, cultural, economic and social practices subsumed under the term "modernity" (Lorenz, 2018). We can only understand social work as a phenomenon and product of modernity, a profession that was shaped very specifically by the processes and challenges arising from the development towards modernity and hence with the break with "given" identity markers. This implies that social work is placed at the very point where the contradictions contained in the project of modernity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969) become apparent and potentially destructive, for individuals as well as for social entities that, again in a typically modern term, are classed as societies. Modernity marks a specific, and to some extent very extreme, explosive and yet promising form of the encounter with diversity, and this above all in the form of the question how the liberation of the individual from external impositions and authorities can be reconciled with the need for social coherence and bonding under conditions of equality. Modern European societies and their political systems have not found one definite answer to this dilemma but are still in the middle of struggling to find answers, in the course of which the various ideologies, political parties, and forms of the welfare state were tried out, under conditions of capitalism, communism and latterly digital capitalism, all with limited success and repeated crises.

This, I propose, is the specific European dimension that is being acted out in the twisted and contradictory path of the European unification

process, in the steering attempts of European nation states trying to find their place in a globalising world, in the changing organisational arrangements of social institutions that are mandated to enhance integration (like educational, health and social service institutions), in the clashes over economic models and their destructive or supportive role in relation to social integration within European conditions, in political and social movements at civil society level. These latter are currently very much focused on questions of collective identity, with racist populism and explicit and highly selective historical references becoming instrumentalised, and also in personal relationships where for instance gender categories differentiate, relationship patterns follow new pathways, social contracts at the person-to-person level get constantly re-negotiated. These phenomena pose serious challenges to the entire project of modernity and of nation state unity.

These are all not exclusively European processes, and phenomena like racism and nationalism are by no means exclusively European inventions. But precisely the example of racism illustrates that its specific modern form and power is linked in a particular way to the European history of science and of bringing modern technology into the service of political power. If we take therefore the example of how to approach the teaching of anti-racist competences in social work, it is not sufficient to concentrate solely on perspectives of psychology or on issues of political power structures. A European perspective suggests that it is a matter of learning to critically and decisively deal with people who are caught up in the interplay of psychologically grounded resentments, economic circumstances, political traditions and symbolic narratives that are the wrong and destructive solution to the fundamental European dilemma. In order to deal with this, social workers should apply the constructive products of European enlightenment with an insistence on rights and on equality. Here a European perspective offers a much wider range of possibilities. And the same is true with subjects like mental health, disability, youth delinquency, interpersonal conflict, domestic violence – the knowledge required for dealing competently with those social problem areas has a universal scientific basis but then also needs to be related to specific political contexts in which they arise and in relation to which specific solutions need to be found. Only in this way can we help future practitioners to cope with the complexity with which problematic social

phenomena present themselves because they arise always in historically contingent contexts.

The practice reality of social workers in this South Tirolian region of Europe bears witness to the relevance and actuality of this perspective. When social workers at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano are being educated in three languages it is not a tokenistic gesture and reference to the peculiar historical situation of this territory. It is not to underline a regional speciality, nor is it a formal, convenient strategy to avoid awkward political questions as to the ethnic composition and orientation of the course. Nor is the linguistic competence just a convenient instrument to overcome language barriers in this multilingual local environment. The multilingual orientation, just because it in most cases cannot produce equal competence in all three languages, is a concrete way of experiencing a perspectivity of cultural, but also of political and emotional belonging that has everything to do with it being a European phenomenon. Seen as a European phenomenon, recognising the wider implications of linguistic competence can then also open up ways of understanding the linguistic dimension of for instance migrants needing forms of social service that take account of their history in relation to Europe as their chosen (or forced) destination. In struggling sometimes for the right words in another language we experience the struggle for understanding generally and therefore the struggle for something that can become a shared concern and hopefully a bond, an expression - or a denial - of solidarity and belonging.

Treating these core issues of social work from a European perspective rather than dealing with them only within specific national or cultural frameworks offers additionally the opportunity of then linking up with similar heuristic approaches that are being developed by partners in other European countries and contexts. A European group of colleagues was engaged in recent years in presenting their commitment to a distinct form of European social work along these lines through publishing a Compendium of European social work (Kessl et al., 2020) which has been completed after overcoming many hurdles in understanding and shaping a common approach. And this search for partners on the road towards a European social work is one of the guiding objectives of the work of the Faculty of Educational Sciences which was summed up very aptly by Urban Nothdurfter in his contribution to a

volume of accounts relating to the changes that 1989 brought to Europe and to European social work (Nothdurfter, 2021). The task is not to develop a speciality in *European dimensions* but on the contrary to mainstream and open up these possibilities and this fundamental orientation to social work students and courses nationally and internationally which is all the more sorely needed in view of the stagnation of the European unification project and the danger of social work education also withdrawing within national boundaries again. Brixen is setting a shining example against such pessimism.

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