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Deconstructing and reconstructing diversity in client-provider-relationships of social work

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1   Introduction

While we write this editorial, we are witnessing in real time how in the United States, one of the major grounds which brought diversity studies to life, the federal government is systematically disassembling the institutional bodies of scientific knowledge on diversity from the top down: Since Donald Trump ordered the elimination of DEI and DEIA (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion, and Accessibility) efforts and programs, the National Science Foundation has paused all grant review panels, while simultaneously scanning ongoing research projects for compliance with the president's executive order (Palmer, 2025). A list of DEI-related blacklisted terms circulated in the scientific community (Novak, 2025), and the President's executive order explicitly terminates "all DEI, DEIA, and 'environmental justice' offices and positions; all 'equity action plans,' equity actions, initiatives, or programs, equity-related grants or contracts; and all DEI or DEIA performance requirements for employees, contractors, or grantees." (Congressional Research Service 2025)

Regardless of any judicial challenges to this executive order, it showcases how diversity policies affect not only academic knowledge, but also the professional and organizational framework of social work practice in its totality. These recent developments lay bare the importance of this special issue.

This applies in particular to the vulnerability of any professional autonomy in social work. If Stefan Köngeter and Timo Schreiner's claim in this issue on social work as "the profession of social justice" holds true, then the blind spot of the discipline and profession is not only in the forms and consequences of knowledge on diversity for the field of social work. Rather, it sheds light on the social context of any professional claim (Hughes, 1958), i.e., the consent and ability of existing structures of dominance to honor and protect these claims (Greenwood, 1957). In social work, this professional claim is particularly challenging, as any avowed form of 'professionalized' social work is faced with the contradiction that, by its very professionalization, it embodies and perpetuates the same structures of dominance it seeks to counter in wider society.

The contributions presented in this special issue were originally organized along the notion of a dual mechanism when it comes to diversity: Social work's mission is to address social problems and alleviate the burdens woven into the fabric of modern societies and thus engages in a deconstructive work on social categorizations, labels, stereotypes and discrimination. At the same time, however, it cannot fully disengage itself from working with these very categorizations and labels. Thus, social work is to some extent conceptually and empirically condemned to reconstruct the content and use of categorizations of diversity (e.g., class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, dis/ability), their dynamics, intersections, and social effects.

In this sense, social work is engaged in at least two kinds of struggles that frame any meaningful engagement with the deconstruction and reconstruction of diversity in client-provider-relationships: First, in addition to struggles over the distribution and allocation of rights and resources for both the providers and their clients, social work is intertwined with struggles over recognition that refer to diverse social identities (Fraser, 1998). Secondly, social work is systematically involved in struggles over authority, i.e., struggles over the legitimacy and appropriateness of categorizations of diversity, their institutional sources and their practical valorization.

Following Wagner (2005), we can see how these struggles involve possibilities of proud self-assertion, but also danger of shame-inducing misrecognition that takes root via the subject's subjugation to power:

> The multiplicity of experiences of recognition, which in turn is constitutively related to heterogeneous orders of recognition that cannot be mapped onto one another, brings subjects into a critically reflected distance from the imposition of particular expectations of recognition. It is precisely from this distance that the subject can and must reflexively comment on societal relations of recognition and the various forms, forums and experiences of recognition and experiences with its own indices of value and weight them accordingly. It must decide whether, from whom, for what and to what end it claims recognition at all and which recognition it may perceive as shame or degradation. (Wagner, 2005, p. 146, transl. L.A.)

Social work professionals and their clients cannot escape mutual identification, classification and valorization. To work together professionally, they must reflexively comment on, or at least make practical reference to each other's identities, bringing diversity dimensions into play as reflective categories. These categories shape the relationships between clients and professionals – even if this happens implicitly or is not explicitly stated. An open and reflective approach to these categories therefore allows for both sides to appraise each other's social identity with awareness. However, the challenge lies in not falling into the traps of stereotyping, discriminating, shaming, and reifying positionings. Thus, diversity cannot be reduced to a finite list of differences that are applied in the interaction between social workers and their clients. Rather, categories of difference serve as temporary and procedural agreements on which inequalities and facets of social identities count in social work client-provider-relationships that aim for a 'just' encounter and outcome of social work interventions. This is also reflected in the academic epistemologies of social work practice.

In the relationships between social work providers and their clients, "diversity work" (Ahmed, 2012) can be captured as a social drama of fulfilling or failing in the deconstruction and reconstructions of identities. That is, the diversity work of providers and clients is concerned with struggles over the distribution of resources, the recognition of difference and authority,

and does so over the legitimate means and ends of social work's professional mandate. In other words, there is and has been much social work practice that ignores diversity work, and there is and has been much social work research and theorizing that ignores the power of reference to social identity in social work practice. But this ignorance does not imply that categories of difference and identity do not powerfully shape both social work practice and social work research and theory. Diversity work in social work client-provider-relationships should therefore be seen as a complex agenda of reflective professional practice with its own challenges and pitfalls.

2   Overview on the papers

The special issue starts with a social psychological paper on space-focused stereotypes by *Iniobong Essien* and *Birte Siem*. In their conceptual analysis, they focus on a form of stereotypes that has been rather neglected in social psychology so far but could be particularly insidious: people's stereotypes about physical spaces (e.g., a neighborhood). They argue that providers' space-focused stereotypes can alter the way they perceive and interact with their clients, which can affect the entire chain of professional practices and decision-making, from initial screening to service delivery. In doing so, they demonstrate how space-focused stereotypes can ultimately reinforce existing racial and ethnic disparities in the provision of social work services.

Turning to the emotional complexity of client-provider-relationships, *Nicole Syringa Harth* and *Diana Düring* investigate the relationship between guilt, shame and diversity issues related to poverty and racism. Taking an integrative approach to psychological research on the role of emotions, the authors show how guilt and shame can pose burdens at interpersonal and organizational levels, particularly in the form of (*white*) guilt on the part of service providers because of their group's privileged position, or shame and guilt on the part of clients for 'doing wrong' or 'failing' to live up to societal norms and expectations.

The next three papers offer insights into the discipline of social pedagogy. *Davina Höblich* sheds light on the experiences of queer professionals. Using biographical interviews, she shows how professionals who are members of the queer community can work with a shared experience of discrimination and expertise that they can use to critically deconstruct heteronormative images of social relationships, sexuality and family. However, the queer professionals interviewed also report that they have to navigate their sexual identities around their colleagues, even though their clients usually do not categorize them as non-cis-gendered or non-heterosexual.

Benedikt Hopmann undertakes a critical examination of the concept of diversity. Starting from a difference-theoretical perspective, the author criticizes the legal and professional understanding of disability and its discriminatory foundations. He illustrates his argument by reflecting on the most recent legislation on inclusive child and youth welfare in Germany. The latter still aims at mere participation (instead of creating or maintaining positive living conditions), while operating within a medical-legal discourse on disability.

Stefan Köngeter and *Timo Schreiner* develop a conceptual framework for critical diversity research in social work organizations from an organizational perspective. Drawing on Iris M. Young's approach to theories of justice, the authors link diversity with the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. From this perspective, they formulate methodological desiderata for a diversity-sensitive approach that highlights diversity as a social construct, promotes inclusion and leaves room for the negotiation of social justice. To be consistent with such an

approach, research on social service organizations must systematically take into account three key elements: the epistemic power of organizations to categorize, their dominance over application and the respective models of justice to which the organizations refer.

Carmen S. Lienen, *Andrea Monika Frisch*, *Agostino Mazziotta* and *Anette Rohmann* present and analyze the photo voice method as a tool to engage and empower people living in marginalized communities. Photo voice is a community-based action research method that allows clients to visually document their everyday lives, particularly with regards to community struggles over needs, issues and strategies aimed at practical solutions for the community. Regarding the third mission of social work, that is to address social inequality, social justice and social change, the authors argue that the method provides clients with a lifeworld orientation, promotes the development of social workers' sensitivity to diversity, and strengthens the relationship between clients and providers.

As diversity is already part of organizational practices and professional programs, *Matthias Rangger* turns to the discursive practices of diversity in social work practice. The author asks what social workers mean when they talk about diversity and reconstructs the underlying patterns of cultural othering. Using his ethnographic data from training programs, the author identifies three ideal types of reference to cultural diversity at play: "domination", "recognition" and "agency". To avoid falling prey to oppressing 'the other', social work needs to create an othering-reflexive practice that simultaneously recognizes and deconstructs diversity.

The last paper by *Vanessa Schwenker* takes a closer look at a low-threshold program in early childhood parenting education for migrant parents. The author shows how this program positions the participants either as "migrantified mothers" who lack the necessary competences to be successful, or as "model migrant mothers" who serve as role models for potential labor market integration. She concludes that recognition does not in itself free the parents from the power dynamics of the client-provider relationship, but shifts professional power to experts, who qualify primarily through identity markers such as ascribed migration experience.

3   Three observational platforms for diversity in client-provider-relationships
To guide the readers through the thicket of this special issue, we would like to highlight three overarching perspectives from which we consider the struggles for distribution, recognition and authority that go along with the deconstruction and reconstruction of diversity in client-provider-relationships of social work.

The first perspective is concerned with **knowledge on/through diversity**. It shows the plurality of differences, social categorizations and social identities that clients and professionals inhabit or have at their disposal. This raises the question of how diversity is taken into account when individual problems and suffering turn into a social problem. As professionals need to apply categories to clients in order to locate them in their classifications and to provide the appropriate services, clients are labelled for different roles based on available markers and competencies each time social work services are provided. This also applies to social work practice that actively and systematically approaches diversity.

However, professionals work based on situated knowledge, which means that not all categorizations and identities are available for them. This leads to a 'social drama of work' between professionals and their clients (Hughes, 1976) that goes beyond the mere tension of

turning individual clients' lived experience into cases that neatly fit into professional taxonomies. Such a positioning of the client can lead to misrecognition, shame or even a complete lack of service to the client. In turn, this can also lead to professionals being perceived as unsupportive or clients being alienated because they perceive professionals as "institutional others" from whom they expect no further recognition, support or resources.

As *Davina Höblich* shows, working with diversity is a two-way street: Diversity is not just a social categorization, social or personal identity of the client. Social workers are part of the everyday world and therefore bear the marks of diversity themselves. They bring diversity into the client-provider-relationship, even if they do not do so voluntarily or consciously. Thus, there is knowledge through diversity: being situated may enable professionals to effectively engage with segments of their clientele, but it may also shield them from relevant categorizations or perpetuate stereotypes. In this way, their clients may be involuntary objectified, projected and positioned.

This raises the question of how existing social categorizations and identities can be incorporated into the professional knowledge base of social work. As *Benedikt Hopmann* argues for models of disability, what matters is how the discipline encodes diversity through modes of knowledge. This also applies to academic discussions about the knowledge base of the professional mandate of social work.

The second perspective gives view to the **materiality of diversity**. Some markers of diversity are immediately visible via the person's body or in their dress practices, such as skin pigmentation, hairstyle, clothing, and jewelry. Body idioms such as comportment, gait and vocal tone, or body techniques such as intentional manipulations can also indicate gendered, generational, religious, and/or ethnic group memberships (Crossley, 2006). This shows that embodied diversity not only functions as tacit knowledge about how to approach each other, but also constrains and structures patterns of service delivery by influencing how professionals and clients manage physical proximity, gaze organization, conversation or the practical accomplishment of their respective involvement (Bogue Kerr, 2025).

Social work entails emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012). As *Nicole Syringa Harth* and *Diana Düring* point out in their article, diversity gets under the skin and provokes emotional or affective responses. At an interpersonal level, this can lead to immediate sympathy or antipathy. But it can also include a whole range of negative emotions, such as disgust, fear, anger, shame, or feelings of guilt and inadequacy. The embodied and affective materiality of diversity can complicate or even counteract rational strategies for supporting clients, or negatively affect their compliance, as professional expectations are often based on cognitively available knowledge on/through diversity.

The materiality of diversity is not limited to involved individuals. *Iniobong Essien* and *Birte Siem* point out very well that diversity is a powerful material context: racialized physical spaces can influence the client-provider dyad via space-focused stereotypes. Diversity thus appears as a place or space (e.g., a client's neighborhood or the location of a service-providing institution) and the associated (negative) stereotypes associated with it, which in turn can lead to biased conclusions in service provision, such as excessive number of out-of-home placements.

The third perspective provides for surveying **diversity in professional programs** of social work. Whereas the struggles for recognition, distribution and authority over knowledge

highlight the categorizations, valorizations and identities of providers and clients, and the materiality of diversity brings out the unintentional and tacit forces that can affect diagnosis, inference, and treatment in the provider-client dyad, this final perspective provides insights into how diversity is systematically woven into and processed in provider-client-relationships. While the social psychological contributions show how diversity can be linked to stereotypes, identities and emotions, a more (but not exclusively) sociological approach addresses the professional and organizational level of decidedly diversity-focused approaches to social work. *Stefan Köngeter* and *Timo Schreiner* discuss how such approaches can be applied in social service organizations, and *Carmen S. Lienen*, *Andrea Monika Frisch*, *Agostino Mazziotta* and *Anette Rohmann* show how diversity work aims to empower clients of social work using the photo voice method.

Against the background of diverse populations, social workers encounter their clients over the course of deconstructing and/or essentializing differences and identities. These deconstructions and/or essentializations are organized and institutionalized through decision-making and treatment procedures. This brings the interplay of resource distribution, recognition and authority into sharp relief, as *Matthias Rangger* has shown in his analysis of cultural othering of social work. Finally, professional programs that are largely geared towards diversity can systematically impact the dynamics between providers and clients at the interactional level, as *Vanessa Schwenker* shows in her study on recognition in early child parenting programs for migrants.

In conclusion, with this special issue we hope to shed some light on the complexity and richness of the perspectives on diversity in social work described above.

As diversity and reflections on diversity affect relationships between clients and providers in social work on multiple levels – from institutionalized programs and interpersonal practices to individual expectations, cognitive make-ups and emotional experiences – the implications of diversity and its reflections in social work practice are still far from being sufficiently empirically researched. Depending on the situation, diversity can be directly involved in the forms of categorizations, valorizations, or social identities that influence professional social work from diagnostic assessment to service delivery. However, it can also be pivotal as a physical or organizational contextual factor that influences decision-making and leads to more (a)symmetrical and (in)equitable distributions of resources, (in)visibility of individuals, and power. In sum, looking at the client-provider-relationships through the lens of diversity powerfully reveals the fundamentally social quality of social work.

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