Queer Professionals – Experts for Gender and Sexual Diversity or Others?

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1 Diversity orientation in social work

Social work faces a dilemma: on the one hand, it acts as a social inclusive aid for marginalized groups and groups at risk of exclusion. On the other hand, the identification of potential addressees contributes to the (re)stigmatization and construction of people as "others" in the sense of othering (Höblich 2020). The determination of who needs social work services to cope with everyday life or, conversely, who can assert a claim order to receive education, help and support in this sense, perhaps even codified in social law, is continuously constructed and (re-)produced by social discourses, but above all by social work itself among other things through the definition of social problems of socio-educational needs. In the course of defining social problems and identifying (potentially) affected population groups as adressees or users of services that respond to these problems, social work therefore also constructs its object, just as it (re-)produces social ideas of normality, deviation and (need for) help. The conflicts in social work and in the lifeworlds of the addressees that come into view here are structural and an expression of fundamental social contradictions (such as forms of social inequality along the lines of difference categories of gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, body, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) (Bitzan & Herrmann 2018).

If social work is to live up to its claim of contributing to greater social justice, its objectives also include working on and improving the (burdensome) conditions in which the addressees find themselves. However, social work must reflect on its own involvement in social power and oppression relations. This includes a critical examination of and reference to precisely those categories of difference such as sick-healthy, normal-deviant, which underlie the state and media constructions of social problems of those "affected" and their necessary treatment through social work services. From the perspective of critical social work, it is therefore a matter of critically reflecting on the professional and socio-political mission of social work, including a self-critical examination of the public perception of social pedagogical professional action. An observation and critique of social conditions on a macro level of public debates about the function of social work in the welfare state then comes into view, as do resistant practices in dealing with (supposed) difference on the meso level of organizations and structures and finally on the concrete micro level of the provision of social services.

2 Dealing with diversity – challenges for a reflexive professionality

Social work professionals must perceive, describe and interpret the reality of their clients' lives in a differentiated manner, justify, plan and implement the interventions they offer as support in the mode of helping people to help themselves and evaluate their consequences afterwards. Reflective approaches to the professionalism of social work (Dewe & Otto 2005; Dollinger 2008; Dewe & Stüwe 2016; Dewe & Otto 2018) emphasize the importance of relating different types of knowledge:

> "The focus of professional action is therefore not "expertise" or "authority", but rather the ability to relate and interpret life-world difficulties in individual cases with the aim of opening up perspectives or justifying decisions under conditions of uncertainty". (Dewe & Otto 2012, pp. 197-198, translated by D.H.)

This rejection of expertocratic knowledge is combined with the demand for a discursive knowledge that enables professionals to relate plural knowledge to each other in a situation- and case-specific manner. According to Dewe and Otto, this insight requires a changed understanding of the theory-practice relationship and a conscious handling of uncertainty and non-knowledge in the interpretation of lifeworld practices and coping requirements as well as the services and interventions that respond to them (Dewe & Otto 2012, p. 198). Dealing with uncertainty arises also from the democratic claim of co-production between professionals and recipients:

> "Interpretations are therefore to be negotiated with the addressees, the handling of interpretations and problem-solving options must be left to the addressees." (Klingler & Wohlfarth 2020, p. 6, translated by D.H.)

Klingler and Wohlfarth (2020, p. 6) point out that it is precisely the conditions of uncertainty that constitute the need for professionalization in social work. According to Hiltrud von Spiegel (2021, pp. 90-95), such a professional attitude requires a wealth of skills,

- "Reflective work on professional attitudes", such as reflecting on individual career choice motives and value standards, a reflective approach to emotions and orientation towards professional value standards

- the "acceptance of individual constructions of meaning", "respect for the autonomy and dignity of the addressees" and a "democratic attitude"

- the reflected "use of professional attitudes" as a habitualization of important "professional value standards" and the "formation of a professional identity" in connection with a reflected "identification with the institution" and the "use [...] of conceptually required attitudes".

This professional attitude expressed in the "interpretation of life-world difficulties" (Dewe & Otto 2012, pp. 197-198) is fed by one's own primary socialization, educational experiences and competence building during studies, as well as by the professional experience acquired after entering professional practice as a lifelong process of professionalization.

The theoretical debates on standardization, normalization and dealing with (ascribed) otherness in social work (Kessl & Plößer 2010; (Beziehungsweise andersrum 1986; Rein 2020) emphasize the need for professionals to consciously make their own social location and their positioning in social relations of power and oppression the subject of professional self-assurance. Professionalism can thus be described last but not least as a reflexive project, especially with regard to the contribution of professionals to the reproduction or dismantling of structural discrimination along categories of difference.

3 Post-structural, feminist, and queer theoretical approaches – potentials of a reflexive professionality

Current anti-democratic developments that call for the retraditionalization of binary gender roles and the restriction of sexual and reproductive rights and health (Henninger & Birsl 2020;

Braun 2017; Hark & Villa 2015) highlight the need for a difference-sensitive approach to sexual and gender diversity[1] and to enable the social participation of people with different gender positions (cisgender, transgender, intersex, non-binary, etc.) and sexual orientations (heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, asexual, etc.).

With the help of post-structuralist and queer theoretical approaches, socially existing ideas of sexuality and gender and the supposedly natural binary of women and men and the heterosexual orientation based on this can be reconstructed as culturally produced conditions. In a second step, this process can be exposed as naturalization and essentialization and thus be subjected to a critique that all other forms of sexual and gender diversity are constructed as deviating from the norm (Butler 1990; Rubin 1993/1984). The concept of heteronormativity formulated by Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant describes very well how the production of culturally conditions of binary sexes and heterosexuality as a norm works:

> "By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, andpractical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is, organized as a sexuality-but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege cantake several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations-often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions" (Warner & Berlant 1998, p. 548)

Hetero-cis-normativity according to Meredith Worthen (2016) a narrative in society "whereby it is "normal" to be both heterosexual and cisgender and it is not normal (and therefore acceptable to be prejudiced toward) nonheterosexual and noncisgender individuals" (Worthen 2016, p. 31).

Based on this analysis and its findings, the third step is to systematically and actively unlearn the internalized differentiations of the discourse – here focused on heteronormativity – via reflexive educational processes (Spivak 1988, p. 91).

Professionals are to develop an attitude of competencelessness competence, as formulated by Paul Mecheril (2013) in relation to pedagogical action in the field of migration and society:

> "Competenceless competence refers to professional action that is based on observation competence for the categories of difference used by social actors and that is generated by an interlocking of knowledge and non-knowledge, of understanding and non-understanding, an interlocking in which sensitivity for relations of dominance and difference is possible in a way that prepares for action. way is possible" (Mecheril 2013, p. 33, translated by D.H.)

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[1] In the following, I will firstly take into account the self-designations and representation policies and use the self-designations lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, trans* and inter*, non-binary as well as the abbreviation LGBTIQ*. Secondly, it is about thinking about diversity from the perspective of diversity (Hartmann 2014). I therefore speak of sexual and gender diversity when it comes to breaking down heteronormative views and naming all forms of sexual orientation (heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, asexual, aromantic, etc.) and gender positioning (cis, trans*, inter*, non-binary, etc.). There may be individual deviations due to the citation of other sources as well as the terms used by the professionals interviewed.

Bettina Kleiner and Florian Cristobal Klenk (2017) adapt the concept of competenceless competence for gender and provide a critical insight in gender competences as a professional prerequisite:

> "Dealing with gender (competence) and orders of difference such as heteronormativity is therefore merely a prerequisite for the (training) formation of professionalized action and cannot guarantee its practical success. As a condition for the possibility of developing a willingness to act, we believe that further education/training in gender competence requires a differentiated understanding of the subjects from which the training is developed. For example, it could be discussed which patterns of interpretation and possibilities for action can be derived from various gender theories for pedagogical action (see Jäckle 2009, p. 319ff.; Micus-Loos 2013: 186ff.). Going beyond a theoretical framing of gender competence, this could support a cognitive process in which it becomes clear how one's own notions of normality of gender and sexuality influence interpretations and actions and what contradictory effects these have." (Kleiner & Klenk, 2017, p. 113 [translated by D.H.])

Kleiner and Klenk criticize the fact that deconstructive perspectives are often only formally followed in concepts and further training. Deconstructivist theories are sometimes used. However, at the level of concrete examples (case presentations of girls and boys) and offers (e.g. gender-specific work with groups of girls and boys), these "tend to remain rooted in a two-gender and essentialist paradigm" (Kleiner & Klenk 2017, p. 104).

In the sense of feminist-critical standpoint theory (see Haraway 1988; Harding 1991; Hartsock 1998; hooks 1984), however, reflection on one's own personal social position within existing relations of domination and oppression is required, as is an examination of one's own internalized discursive practices of producing difference, subject and identities and the underlying constructs.

In the following, I take a closer look at how these criticisms and demands can find their way into a queer-theoretically informed re-adjustment of the professionalism of social work.

4 Queer-theoretically informed professionalism

The first approaches and theoretical concepts for a queer-theoretically inspired professionalism are now available.

The concept of rainbow competence by Ulrike Schmauch (2014; 2020a) formulates a necessary professionalization of professionals in the field of sexual and gender diversity similar to the critical considerations on models of intercultural competence and gender competence with regard to "institutional processes of opening up and reducing thresholds and risks of discrimination, on the other hand, qualification in the areas of knowledge, methods and professional attitude, the ability to reflect and act". (Schmauch 2020a, p. 309). According to this, rainbow competence is realized in the following competence dimensions:

1. "factual competence: knowledge about the heterosexual majority society, about sexual and gender minorities, their life situations, discrimination and resources,

2. social competence: communication and cooperation skills in the area of sexual and gender diversity,

3. methodological competence: ability to act and procedural knowledge in the area of sexual orientation and gender identities,

4. self-competence: reflecting on one's own feelings, values and prejudices in relation to sexual diversity." (Schmauch 2020a, p. 309, translated by D.H.)

The concept of rainbow competence also seeks to counteract subtle and indirect forms of discrimination against queer people in social work practice and thus stands for inclusion-promoting anti-discrimination work.

Rainbow competence should be used as a specific concept for topics relating to sexual and gender diversity by translating political convictions that are critical of discrimination into the ability to act professionally. This requires the creation of a theoretical and methodological foundation on sexual and gender diversity, which is to be achieved by embedding a respectful attitude in training and further education as well as in the mission statements, policies and concepts of social institutions (see Schmauch 2020b). With regard to social competence, Schmauch advocates a reflective approach to difference, which should not be overestimated, but also not underestimated (Schmauch 2020b, 311f.). With the concept of competenceless competence, the approach of rainbow competence can be criticized from a queer theory perspective in that there is a risk of knowledge about gender and sexual minorities being codified.

While the model of rainbow competence is oriented towards affirmation, the approach of queer professionalism emphasizes the deconstruction of supposedly fixed identities. In her outline of queer professionalism, Jutta Hartmann criticizes the fact that 'queer' not only includes LGBTIQ* people, but that heterosexuality must also be recognized as part of the diversity of sexuality and gender (see also Jannink & Witz 2020, p. 154ff.). Consequently, she advocates a perspective that "thinks diversity from diversity" (see Hartmann 2014). This includes to deconstruct heterosexuality as the norm and viewing heterosexuality as just one (!) part of the canon of possibilities for forming one's own sexual and gender identity. Just like the concept of rainbow competence, queer professionalism includes reflecting on one's own sexual and gendered self-positioning in order to critically question one's own thought patterns and organizing processes (see Hartmann 2014, p. 28; Foucault 2014 [1977]). With the concept of queer professionalism, however, affirmative approaches are criticized even more clearly in that they emphasize non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people as a group particularly worthy of protection. Affirmative approaches bear the risk of leading to the objectification of existing identity categories with the danger of generalizing individual life situations and losing focus. Queer professionalism is therefore concerned with deconstructing "ideas of normality in a productive way and counteracting the reification of lifestyles through thought-provoking ideas that are critical of norms." (Hartmann 2014, p. 27 [translated D.H.; see also Schütte-Bäumner 2010; Baer & Höblich 2021; Höblich 2022).

In this sense, queer professionalism uses postheteronormative pedagogy and deconstruction as a queer-theoretical, post-structuralist method to expose the ways in which gender binaries and hierarchies as well as regimes of desire are produced as socially and historically established (difference) categories as a permanent 'doing difference' (West & Fenstermaker 1995), to critically analyze them and to derive implications for a critical (educational) practice of social work. Such post-heteronormative social work thus represents a critique and further development of the ways in which gender and sexual diversity are thematized in the sense of working on boundaries, which is always also formulated as a critique of the conditions

(Höblich & Goede 2021). Queer and post-heteronormative - social work can therefore contribute to revealing contexts of concealment, as described by Maria Bitzan (2019).

In the following, I take a closer look at the opportunities and limits of a queer and post-heteronormative professionalism based on a recently completed research project.

5 Queer professionals – queer professionalism: empirical findings on a readjustment of professionalism

The study Queer Professionals - Professionalism between "queer expert" and "other" in social work (QueerProf)[2] aimed to investigate the situation of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender professionals in social work in more detail using the example of child and youth welfare and pursued a twofold interest in knowledge and a twofold objective:

1. (Anti-) discrimination of LGBTIQ* social work professionals in the workplace - The reconstruction of experiences of discrimination and coping skills of LGBTIQ* professionals in fields of social work using the example of child and youth welfare.

2. Contribution of LGBTIQ* professionals to a regulatory structure and its services for users, sensitive to discrimination and needs-based (professional theoretical perspectives on queer professionals as experts on sexual and gender diversity)

Across Germany, 16 professionals from different fields of child and youth welfare were interviewed in episodic interviews.

In the following, I will focus exclusively on the second aspect of the research interest. Non-heterosexual and non-cisgender professionals have situated knowledge with regard to discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender in the sense of the standpoint theories mentioned above (see with regard to educators of color: May 2020) based on their own experiences in their social position. The study was interested in the question of the extent to which the biographical experiences made on the basis of one's own social positioning and their critical reflection linked back to scientific knowledge contribute to a queer professionalism that is critical of heteronormativity. On the one hand, the challenges faced by queer professionals as those "affected" by social categories of inequality are reconstructed against the background of feminist standpoint theory. On the other hand, the potentials of deconstruction as a method of queer-theoretical, post-structuralist and post-colonial approaches for a queer professionalism in social work and a post-heteronormative education are explored.

The chances of whether and how queer professionals visibly contribute as queer professionals in relation to sexual and gender diversity depends not least on whether and, if so, to whom they are out in the workplace. It can be assumed that how they deal with their own outness and their strategies are also influenced by possible experiences of discrimination. A central third topic was therefore the investigation of outing by child and youth welfare professionals. Findings from the project "Sexual Orientation in Child and Youth Welfare" (SeKiJu) (Höblich and Kellermann 2017) show that professionals make a very clear distinction between coming out within the team and to their clients:

> "[...] then I also have to say; ehm with sexual orientation, for me as a professional (-) so AND homosexuals (-) I keep that ABSOLUTELY secret from the clients, (-) um although here, I'll say, every colleague knows. [...] Yes and ehm But, with the colleagues/ eh with the clients, I fear the stigma (-) that one is then considered eh I say, one is then so to speak ehm not relevant (-) for their problems. So the dominance of heterosexuality is [...] the dominant (-) leading culture." (Angela, Group 01 Z. 156-156)

The professionals surveyed in the QueerProf project partly confirm this finding. The majority of respondents are not visible to their clients as non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual persons. The findings of the QueerProf project show that dealing with one's own outing in the workplace depends largely on two factors from a diachronic perspective:

- From the generational perspective and the social climate perceived in each case: the interviewees made a clear distinction between the 1990s and the 2000s, with an initially repressive climate of pathologization and criminalization and later liberalization. A further distinction was made between the 2010s and 2020s with extensive legal equality, a decline in overt discrimination and the simultaneous persistence of subtle forms of rejection and discrimination (diachronic dimension - society).

- Depending on the point in their own professional biography: Many professionals avoid coming out at the beginning of their own professional career if they have little professional experience and are therefore less regarded on the labor market as experienced professionals with correspondingly lower chances of finding jobs (diachronic dimension - time in one's own (professional) biography).

In addition to this temporal perspective, the visibility of queer professionals depends on various factors and framework conditions of the organization and the institution, such as difference-sensitive organizational (cultural) policies, visible queer colleagues or superiors, team climate, addressees, colleagues, etc. (Höblich & Baer 2022, p. 36 and p. 62-72)

In their (case) stories and professional biographies, some of the interviewees demonstrated a high level of rainbow expertise from a professional perspective (knowledge of coming-out processes, existing legal disadvantages, particularities in family planning, typical reactions of the social environment, existing discrimination in the areas of family, school and leisure, as well as knowledge of resources in the community and specialist counseling centers, etc.):

> "Af: Well, because I perhaps also deal with it personally in a different way, // mhm// read different texts or have different conversations and have a different eye for things. // mhm, mhm// listen differently, look differently than perhaps a heterosexual colleague (.) does. //mhm// and also have a different feeling for these young people. //mhm// how they can or do // mhm// in coming out. //mhm// and also tend to go to such events again. // mhm// well, I'm also at the queer, ä:h at the queer round table, //mhm// at federal state 1, that's important to me. //mhm// so, also to see what's going on, what's new, what's on, what's on offer in feredal state 1" (08_NE_JA_KJA, pos. 527-534)

Full-time work, specialist political involvement in the communities and political parties are combined and the knowledge acquired in this way is used in a targeted manner as specialist expertise:

"//mhm// um, for example, but (.) I am also privately involved in party politics and then
I somehow pushed the administration here to write an LGBTIQ* action plan for the city.
But then I influenced and also helped to steer the process together with the other head of
the institution" (16_IU_ OKJA, pos. 295-298)

Some of the interviewees continue to develop their biographical experiences and the situated
knowledge they have acquired about them into a positioned professionalism, e.g. taking on
professional responsibility for the topic of sexual and gender diversity in the team or acting as
contact persons and case managers for recipients and colleagues:

"um it then became clear quite quickly (.) that I had offered um or that (.) roles like this
were simply focal points in the work, um in the, um in our work. and that I was
responsible for the queer cases." (03_MG_EBG-1, pos. 162-171)

However, the attribution of expertise to queer professionals on the basis of their own
membership of sexual and/or gender minorities is sometimes also viewed critically as
othering and the refusal of heterosexual and/or cisgender colleagues to undergo further
professional training on sexual and gender diversity, and thus ultimately as a denial of queer
professionalism:

"yes, so at the end of the day I'm also at this round table, so to speak? but that's ( ) okay
for me because I've just talked about it and ne and this so (..) um (.) yes, I just went into
the conversation to say this is how it is oka::y? //mhm// so you trust me with this
professionalism? //mhm// and you don't attribute this professionalism to me because I'm
gay, but because you realize um I'm dealing with it. like that. [...] And I just have - I
bring knowledge that the others don't have, and that would be an enrichment for the
round table. //mhm// and then I can use it (.) then I say okay; then I'll do it too. but I
don't just go there because I'm gay" (02_TI_JV, pos. 359-368)

Many of the interviewees deconstruct gender stereotypes in their collaboration with
colleagues using socio-pedagogical methods and thus perform queer professionalism as a
deconstruction of the social production of difference in order to maintain relations of
domination and oppression (methodological competence - postheteronormative pedagogy).

On the other hand, queer professionals have specific methodological approaches (e.g. coming-
out counseling, group offers, safe spaces, diversity-conscious pedagogy) as well as
networking and referral skills (Spiegel 2018) that draw on community resources and
networks. Many of the interviewees emphasize the importance of inclusive and gender-
appropriate language as a methodological competence, thinking diversity from the perspective
of diversity and thus making it visible in professional activities:

"So, for example, when I spoke to the first trans young person, (.) the very first thing I
asked her after we greeted each other briefly was what pronoun she would like to be
addressed with. and her face immediately brightened and she said: this is the first time
in youth welfare that someone has asked me that. Yes, and and and that's where I think
this approach is" (13_XQ_SHzE, pos. 196-199)

The interviewees used their own queer lifestyle to deconstruct heteronormative images of
relationships, sexuality and family and thus critically question supposed normalities with the
addressees in the sense of postheteronormative pedagogy (social competence -
postheteronormative pedagogy):

"especially during this time, so in this girls' camp (.) it's often the case that we somehow work a lot with clichés, for example, we also do um (.) wrestling and brawling with the girls //mhm// (.) and um they're usually quite proud, so they always need a bit because they say: "how do you fight now? and now here somehow arm wrestling and-? no, girls don't do that." (.) but once you've got them that far, then they really get going and um, my colleague and I are always quite flabbergasted when they really get going and at the end they always say something like: "yes, now we've really fought like the boys" um, then we always say: "no:: (.) you've really fought like strong girls", //mhm// (.) so we kind of try to maintain this (.) um (.) yes, not directly competitive thinking, but a little bit of this - they're not opposites of each other, so we just kind of want to break down this um - one is now completely different from the other - we always wanted to do that a little bit //mhm// (.) exactly, so that the abilities are not linked to gender //mhm// (.) yes" (10_TNN_SPFH, pos. 150-162)

6   Conclusion

The hierarchy of gender and heteronormativity represents social systems of oppression that influence clients, professionals, tasks, services and programmes of social work in complex ways, intersecting with other dimensions of diversity. Within client-provider relationships, professionals navigate between addressing existing heteronormative and cis-normative discrimination and its impact on LGBTIQ* persons as potential service users, while reducing othering and mitigating the social construction of difference that perpetuates relations of domination and oppression.

The Queer Professionals project was the first to work out the opportunities and limits as well as the specifics of a professionalism positioned in relation to gender and sexual diversity for the breadth of child and youth welfare as a professional field of work with young people. In terms of standpoint theory, following Hartmann (2020) and Christian Schütte-Bäumner (2007; 2010), the situatedness and societal positioning of professionals within social power and oppression relations is emphasized as a relevant topic of professional theory considerations. Professionals are confronted with the normality of a heteronormative society. However, they do so in relation to their own gender positioning and sexual orientation and in terms of standpoint theory as positioned professionals who contribute situated knowledge. In general and with regard to other lines of difference (disability and non-disability, age, gender, social background, being a care leaver, etc.), they can contribute specific expertise. They can have specific specialist knowledge and reflexivity on social problems (poverty, addiction, illness) or ascribed group affiliations and the associated ascribed vulnerabilities for being affected by social problems (discrimination, violence and, as a result, (partial) exclusion from social areas such as education, work, housing, politics and the community) if biographical experiences and their own social positioning are professionally processed and reflected upon. Working as positioned professionals in a reflected way can contribute to consider diversity in client-provider-relationships as part of between affirmative practice and deconstruction of differences.

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