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Critical Diversity Research in Social Service Organizations – a conceptual framework

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1 Introduction

In this article, we will discuss diversity-sensitive research approaches and demonstrate how researchers can engage in self-critical reflections on their projects in relation to diversity and inclusion. To begin, we will explore the connection between diversity and research on professionalism and organizations. By understanding this mutual dependence, researchers can better appreciate the implications of diversity in their work and foster a more inclusive research environment.

The discourse on diversity is fundamentally changing the understanding of professionalism and organizations in social work. To illustrate this, it is necessary to highlight the common blind spot—namely, the diversity of their members and clients—in previous organizational and professional research. Studies in this field of social work have shown fundamental differences and tensions: Professionalism is understood as the third pillar within the societal division of labor, alongside markets and bureaucracies (Freidson, 2001). While organizations are considered ideal types for producing and bringing goods to the market in a division of labor that is as efficient and effective as possible as well as for organizing state administrations in the form of bureaucracies, numerous points of tension are typically identified in the relationship between organizations and professions (Köngeter, 2025). Among other issues, it is emphasized that professions, due to their reference to central societal values such as social justice, require ethical reflection in order to act adequately. In contrast, organizations are often assumed to orient themselves not primarily on values, but rather on securing their own existence in the context of a constantly changing social environment. This area of conflict is particularly evident in social service organizations that consider themselves, but also seek to be recognized and positioned within society, as value-based (Schreiner & Köngeter, 2020).

In discussions, particularly with regard to organization and management theory enduring up until the 1970s, there is a common understanding that organizations have disregarded individual diversity among their members: “From Walter Dill Scott (Scott & Clothier, 1923) to Rensis Likert (1967), organizational behavior was simply the behavior of ‘people’, who differed in their possession of psychological variables, such as personality, but who shared a universal framework in which the same variables had the same relationship to one another and to social reality. This generic subject facilitated the mass production of management knowledge about those who, in parallel fashion, mass-produced the goods of society” (Jacques 2016). In a similar way, it can also be traced in research on the social work profession that diversity among professionals played little significance. Professionals and members of organizations were characterized solely by their cognitive knowledge and their

rationally influenced abilities. Rather, it was assumed that their professional training would enable them to approach and work with their clientele free of prejudice. The only difference was that their abilities significantly differed from those shaping organizations in that their academic knowledge had to always be applied on a case-by-case basis and a reference to values and norms had to be established.

It was indeed the diversity among clients that initially brought to light this neglect of diversity issues. Within social work, professionals and academics had to recognize that the understanding of the client group could no longer be limited to traditional lines of difference characterized by economy (the primary focus of social work and social policy) and education (the primary focus of social pedagogy). Social workers had to acknowledge that their clients were indeed diverse, a recognition linked to the feminist movement of the 1960s, which in turn was closely connected with the Black civil rights movement in the USA. Groups like the Combahee River Collective highlighted such overlapping oppressions and demonstrated the intersection of different diversity categories (Hughes 2024). These clients included 'foreigners,' 'resettlers,' and 'migrants'; furthermore, individuals with disabilities were no longer segregated into institutions for special education with their own specialized professions and academic disciplines but were included in the broader clientele of Social Work. In the discourse on intersectionality, the overlaps among these categories of difference have been highlighted, and in the context of identity politics, emphasis was placed on the tensions arising from constructing, deconstructing, and redefining identities. Finally, from a critical perspective, the power dynamics surrounding the use of categories, particularly in the field of social work practice as well as in theory and research, were discussed (Bretländer et al., 2015; Filsinger, 2002; Gaitanides 2004; Lutz et al., 2013; Maurer, 2014).

This neglect of diversity issues on part of organizations and professions has also been perpetuated by research. While we now have nuanced studies on clients and their individual diversity and intersectionality, research on professionals and organizations largely remains unaffected by the increasingly perceived societal diversity. Investigations carried out on professional fields within social work have frequently shown how significantly personal biographies shape the professional self-concept of social workers and — vice versa — how infrequently education and profession actually influence professional behavior (Schweppe 2002). However, this has not led to any form of recognition regarding the importance of diversity in an individual's biographical experiences. Instead, this oversight continues to be criticized, and efforts are made to more strongly commit social workers and social pedagogues to the professional ideal (Sommerfeld, 2022). Even if it were possible, which would certainly be desirable, to strengthen the professional ideal in social workers and social pedagogues, we would still be dealing with professionals who bring with them a variety of experiences with different categories of difference, and who meet clients for whom it indeed makes a difference whether they are dealing with a Black or white social worker, a man or woman, a cis or trans person, or a person experiencing or having experienced physical disability, etc. In a study on diversity in youth welfare offices, Schreiner (2020) demonstrates that professionals explicitly experience themselves in reference to their own biography. For example, disability is presented as a characteristic of personality and as part of professional identity. Nevertheless, it can be critically questioned which bodies of knowledge professionals rely on and to what extent professionalism can be replaced by individual biographical experiences at all. Questions also arise empirically, for example in the context of Disability Studies and other research directions, where particularly individuals who have experienced marginalization and discrimination act as researchers. These examples

demonstrate: It is important to reflect on and emphasize that diversity in biographies can make various perspectives visible and audible, potentially influencing both the profession and the organization as well as the research conducted on them.

These developments and the asynchrony in perceiving diversity with respect to clients, professions, organizations, and in research are linked to larger societal trends in which the perceptions of what is considered to be just have changed. New conceptions of justice can be traced back to the civil rights and other social movements in the 1960s, which initially highlighted the marginalization, discrimination, and oppression of certain groups based on their identity. The nuances and contexts of concealment and suppression within organizations and professions are only slowly being reconstructed and deconstructed regarding individual categories of diversity. In the following sections, we will first discuss social justice and diversity within the context of organizations, then derive implications for diversity-sensitive research, and finally explore specific opportunities for reflection on research in social work organizations.

2 Competing understandings of social justice from a critical diversity perspective

Diversity studies have significantly changed the discussion about social justice over the past two decades. We will demonstrate the implications this has for research in social professions and organizations. To this end, the relationship between social work and social justice will first be addressed, followed by a discussion of the transformation of this relationship through theories of justice, such as those proposed by Young (1990).

Social professions and organizations in social work assert in their policies and in public that they are guarantors of social justice. Often, they reference a professional ethic that considers social justice integral to their activities, as articulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW): "Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work." Theories of social work and social policy also play an important role here. This includes the theoretical assumptions of social work scholars like Staub-Bernasconi (2019), who views social work as a human rights profession based on theories of justice, as well as socio-pedagogical theories that perceive social work as a justice profession (Schrödter, 2007) and propose Martha Nussbaum's capability approach as a normative foundation (Ziegler et al., 2010).

Such a theoretical approach already directs further questions about social justice in a manner that does not adequately address the problem context. For social work, its professionals, and its organizations are simply understood as actors in the service of social justice. If practices within social work are revealed to be socially unjust, this is perceived as a professional and organizational failure. However, this does not prevent academic disciplines or professions from continuing to consider themselves a justice profession, but rather serves as a call to exert more effort, implement better self-controls or organizational protective concepts, etc. The blind spot of this approach, however, lies in the lack of reflection on its own dominance. By claiming the mandate to create social justice, social work also claims the authority to define what social justice is and how it can be achieved. Despite the heterogeneity of concepts and theories pertaining to social justice, social work tends to monopolize this mandate and insulate itself against any external objections.

Social justice should therefore not be understood solely as a guiding norm, but should also be seen as a task that can and must be organized, in the profession, in organizations, but also in

research on professions and organizations. This is due to the complex, multifaceted, ambiguous, and socially contentious concept of social justice. On the one hand, there are moral philosophical discussions about the concept of justice. Here, Sen (2009) distinguishes what he calls transcendental institutionalism, which includes theorists such as Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls. According to Sen, these theorists seek universally valid rules and institutions that are intended to lead to a just society. Other theorists, on the other hand, consider the various possibilities of how "people can actually live" (Sen, 2009, S. 18) and how these possibilities are influenced by institutions, preferences, and other factors. In this second approach, to use the language of Sen and Nussbaum, the focus is on capabilities. This conceptualization of justice moves away from identifying universal rules. Instead, the diversity of ways in which people live their lives is central to Sen's argument, who posits that we are always confronted with competing conceptions of justice and that, ultimately, we cannot identify a single unifying and universal principle for social justice.

Young's theory of justice also assumes a pluralistic conception of justice. She argues that discussions about justice have concrete starting points in the experience and articulation of injustice. She is known for her distinction between five forms of oppression, thus five distinct modes of injustice: She argues that justice is not always tied to questions of distributive justice. With her distinctions between exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism, she refers to distinct forms of injustice, each underpinned by distinct forms of non-recognition. These forms of injustice cannot solely be attributed to distributive justice but also raise questions of participatory justice, which is socially restricted based on individual characteristics and refers to the discourse on diversity and politics of identity (Benhabib, 1997). To relate this back to the discussion on organizations and professions: While social service organizations and social professions have primarily focused on issues of distributive justice, even strongly identifying with them, the question of participatory justice, which includes considerations of education as well as racist attributions, migration and refugee experiences, sexual orientation, and gender identities, is now becoming increasingly prominent.

This brings us to a second aspect of social injustice in Young's work (Young, 1990, 2000). Young does not stop with identifying the five forms of oppression, but highlights an important institutional component of practices of injustice, namely dominance. In Young's view, dominance is the result of political processes, or in the case of Social Work and welfare state institutions: a lack of participation in a political process. She argues that we are dealing with an increasingly institutionalized and depoliticized welfare state, which removes rules and decision-making processes from public discussion. For social service organizations, this means that although they incorporate normative and socially critical responses into their DNA, they thereby remove these responses from the political process and naturalize them. This process of depoliticization also occurs within welfare state organizations: Because it is not possible to have a political debate for all case scenarios, decisions must be made continuously, and such decisions are shifted to social service organizations where they are depoliticized. This is also due to the structure of these organizations, which see themselves as professional expert organizations that do not orient themselves on democratic participatory rights, but on the functional logic of their tasks and their normative commitment to social justice. As a result, (social service) organizations themselves become instruments of inequality and injustice (Engel/Göhlich 2022: 209ff). Within this there lies a consequential paradox: these organizations believe they are ensuring social justice, but by their very structure, they promote social injustice by removing justice decisions from public reasoning.

In other words: Social service organizations, in the name of social justice, implement structures of professional dominance, thereby also creating the conditions that allow these dominance structures to sometimes turn into oppression. Schröder (2023) points out the importance of a critical point of view and the importance of participation within organizations. Even critical diversity research in organizations claims for itself the ability to analytically examine and expose relationships of injustice. However, critical diversity research in organizations must also confront the question: What conception of justice does it presuppose? How does it perceive conflicting conceptions of justice that arise particularly in the context of an increasingly diverse society? This idea needs to be revisited later and systematically integrated into the concept of a critical diversity research in organizations. Before that, it seems sensible to explicitly address an understanding of diversity that does not solely rely on essentialist categories but explicitly considers contextual conditions and organizational and societal relations.

3 From Diversity to Inclusion

Diversity is the term used for a phenomenon discussed in several academic disciplines and professions and contextualized differently in each. The term gained central importance in the context of economics and as diversity management with respect to the deliberate handling of diversity in organizations. Originally rooted in the USA and the civil rights movement (McDonald, 2010), diversity management often relates to for-profit organizations and addresses measures of equality in the labor market. It is highlighted that diversity management offers competitive advantages for organizations. At the same time, there are concerns that diversity is exploited only for organizational and economic purposes (Lederle 2008) or that diversity management comes under pressure because demonstrating economic benefits can be very difficult (Süß 2009).

Recently, in management studies, the concept of diversity is often widened to encompass the concept of inclusion (Mor Barak 2015). Firstly, in distinction to the concept of diversity, it is emphasized that inclusion focuses on the contributions of various organizational members and their opportunities to participate in organizational processes (ibid.: 85). Secondly, structural aspects and power relations are considered, through which organizational members attain more powerful positions than others. In this context, Nkomo (2014) emphasizes that the inclusion perspective goes even further and addresses organizational culture with regard to embedded processes of discrimination and participation. Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann (2012) clarify in this regard that diversity management can stimulate organizational learning to develop inclusive organizational cultures. From this perspective, diversity, diversity management, and inclusion are inseparable and must be related to each other in the context of organizational culture.

In social sciences, diversity has been gaining greater attention since the 1990s and is linked to other concepts such as "difference," "inequality," "variety," or "heterogeneity" (Winkler/Degele 2010; Koller 2014; Rein & Riegel, 2016). In contrast to the discourse in management studies, diversity is usually approached in an anti-essentialist way. This is compatible with sociological theoretical traditions that examine how differentiation, categorization, and marking of difference, such as "Doing Difference" (Fenstermaker/West 2001) or "Doing Gender" (Butler 1990), are constructed (Nieswand, 2021). Consistent with these approaches, Özdemir (2019) also advocates for a redefinition of diversity management by linking it to the question of whether and in what respects it could improve the capabilities of organizational members. She thus focuses on the relationship between individual agency, organizational structures, and social justice. Her approach builds on concepts of diversity

management that aim to proactively create inclusion, structurally transform the organization, and help shape the organizational environment (Bührmann 2017).

In this sense, this article also favors a concept of diversity that critically examines the construction and fixation of categories of difference. Such a theoretical perspective understands diversity as the result of an ongoing process of translation (Engel/Köngeter 2019), through which "power relations and modes of social action construct potential differences into socially effective markers within specific socially, culturally, and politically constructed physical and symbolic spaces that change over time" (Lehmkuhl 2019: 35). Diversity management is, therefore, a set of measures that control these translation processes, which address the marking of differences, and that can be justified both ethically and economically. Finally, inclusion, according to our understanding, focuses on the question of how power relations are shaped within these organizational cultures (understood as socially, culturally, and politically constructed social spaces) so that opportunities for realization are fairly distributed and thus participation is enabled. This perspective on inclusion is already encapsulated in the concept of diversity we favor, because it addresses the issues of marking differences regarding the actors and their positioning in relation to opportunities for realization within the organization at the same time.

In contrast to other organizations, social service organizations exhibit key differences that play a significant role in addressing diversity and inclusion. Tomlinson and Schwabenland (2010) demonstrate that for social service organizations, the issue of social justice is inherently embedded, thus utilitarian arguments tend to be devalued. Therefore, the question of whether diversity management is driven by economic or moral reasons is contextualized differently in social service organizations. Particularly in the context of diversity and inclusion, social service organizations are expected to be actors that promote diversity and enable inclusion (Walgenbach 2014). The social service sector has responded with a differentiation of its social services: migration services have been expanded, integration assistance for people with disabilities established, youth work has evolved with a focus on different gender identities, sexual orientations are more thoroughly considered in youth welfare, and much more. As value-oriented organizations, social service organizations have developed a keen sense of social justice issues and advocate for diversity and inclusion.

As historical research shows (Popkewitz 2001), social work and social service organizations aim to create a state of normality that is often not clearly defined, in the name of an imagined community. Accordingly, Olk (1986) analyzes social service organizations in their performance of “normalization work”. This normalization work is manifested in the many programs based on changing the deviant behaviors of individuals or groups. In this sense, social service organizations deal with addressing deviations of individuals within the context of societal expectations of normality. Thus, on the one hand, social service organizations are oriented towards achieving social justice in relation to an increasingly diversifying society, and on the other hand, it is characteristic for them to correct deviations in the name of societal expectations of normality.

This becomes particularly evident when we look at recent empirical studies on social service organizations. Studies on the phenomena of diversity and inclusion are still underrepresented in the context of organizational research in the field of social service organizations. There are only initial research projects providing insights from an explicitly organizational theoretical perspective, such as the study by Kubisch (2008, 314), which finds that social organizations, contrary to popular belief, have a negative view on organizational diversity. Moreover, it

remains largely unclear how, beyond professional and organizational policies, diversity and inclusion are produced in organizations, which categories of difference are referred to in organizations, how these are processed, and finally, what capabilities arise for the actors in these social service organizations. Another one of the few studies with an organizational perspective is conducted by Schreiner (2021), who shows that although diversity is explicitly described along categories that are often used in diversity management literature and discussions, additional categories are made relevant if they are of significance in organizational culture. This includes, for example, clothing in the context of an organizational dress code. In the social organization studied, clothing is also linked to the profession of social work. By this, biography, organization, diversity, and profession are directly intertwined and presented as a complex entity.

4 Critical diversity research in organizations

If diversity and inclusion represent a central phenomenon in the context of social justice, this leads not only to questions about organizational management and development but also to questions about the investigation of diversity in organizations. Subsequently, we consider research on diversity and inclusion in organizations as part of a process of production, reproduction, and transformation of diversity, and contemplate how these questions about diversity can be approached in organizational research. With a focus on organizational cultural practices, both in the social service organizations and the researchers and their academic organizations, we describe a critical diversity approach in the research process on organizations.

We have previously argued that the discussion on diversity in social work has led to two significant changes. On the one hand, organizations in social work and their professionals are more critically reflecting on diversity among their members and clients. On the other hand, the question of justice in social work has also transformed, now encompassing the significance of various lines of difference in the assessment of justice. Both aspects are reflected in the importance of inclusion, which cannot simply be reduced to whether certain groups are or are allowed to be part of social work organizations, but rather to whether and in what ways they are allowed to influence decisions within these organizations. Therefore, it is of interest which categories of difference are made relevant or irrelevant in social service organizations, who has the opportunity in the research process to make these (ir)relevance determinations, and what possibilities for knowledge creation are opened up or limited accordingly. These determinations of (ir)relevance enable organizations, in accordance with their organizational cultures, to legitimize strategies of professional behavior internally and externally.

Diversity has been given more attention in social work in recent years (Aschenbrenner-Wellmann & Geldner, 2021). However, little has been systematically researched so far and the research process critically reflected from a diversity perspective. Instead, the diversity of clients and professionals as well as in social work organizations has been studied with an object-oriented focus. Critical diversity research in organizations has the task of considering the power relations in the production of this diversity in organizations and reflecting this in the design and conduct of the research.

For this, we can draw on existing experiences in critical diversity management (Czollek et al., 2019) and in organizing inclusion (Booth/Ainscow 2003) and apply their principles to the research process itself. In the context of diversity management, a variety of handbooks and guides focus particularly on processes and structures of organizations. However, a critical

diversity research of organizations also queries their environments and cultures shaped by various societal actors (e.g., professions, financing administrations, social movements). With the Index for Inclusion (Booth/Ainscow 2003), for example, there is a tool that considers both structures as well as cultures of organizations. From there, we take the proposal to ask questions that are linked to dimensions and indicators in order to assess the inclusivity of the research approach. Asking questions thus becomes a critical mode of reflection in organizational research, as it points to the limits and possibilities of knowledge creation, especially with regard to unquestioned unifying assumptions about the diversity of clients and organizations. Moreover, several contributions have been published in the English-speaking world based on experiences in critical diversity research providing methodological reflections (López López et al., 2021; Mathijssen et al., 2023; Nørholm Just et al., 2020). We intend to bundle these insights, contemplations, and questions into three dimensions: diversity, inclusion and justice. We suggest reflecting on all three dimensions in critical diversity research within social service organizations.

In the following sections, we will present examples of steps within research projects and how researchers can use questions to focus on a diversity-sensitive process in organizations. We assume that organizational processes and the research on these processes are intertwined. Therefore, these questions can be used as a tool for providing opportunities for reflection and critical examination of the very processes of organizational research at various levels, but they can also be applied to processes and structures within the organizations examined. These are, of course, only examples and do not limit the scope of inquiry to the questions below. In this sense, it is possible to create one's own critical reflection questions tailored to a specific research project.

4.1 (De-)Constructing Diversity

Diversity is neither socially nor organizationally a given, but has been and continues to be socially constructed. However, this social construction is not arbitrary and cannot simply be wished away or summoned; it has been produced through historically contested developments and now stands before us as a social fact. Therefore, critical diversity research of organizations is called upon to reflect and position its scientific practices within this contested societal process.

Diversity is already constructed in the formation of scientific organizations. Universities and their resulting knowledge productions and educational processes are influenced by the diversity and inclusion they foster (Crimmins, 2020). This organizational context also impacts the research processes that occur within the framework of faculties, institutes, and teams. Particularly in the process of organizational research, the composition of the research team is of central importance (Mathijssen et al., 2023). Ethnographic research has shown and reflected that the body of researchers always carries various discourses and offers different possibilities for action and knowledge in the research process depending on the body (Hoel 2013).

Moreover, researchers bring different experiences to the subject of research. Particularly the experiences of clients of social service organizations who are active as organizational researchers provide a different horizon of experiences than those who have worked as professionals in these organizations. Such experiences can be both inhibitory and conducive to the research process itself. Similar experiences between researchers and participants can create expectations that researchers would better understand the participants' situations, although the experiences can be very different; on the other hand, a lack of experience with

the subject can provide an opportunity for impartiality and distance, but also prevent access to certain voices and stories.

Regarding the clients, the question arises to what extent their diversity is considered in organizational research. Initially, it involves questions about which categories are used and whether intersections of diversity categories are addressed. This question of visibility and concealment, as well as self- and external categorization, is closely linked with ethical issues, focusing on how previous experiences of discrimination are methodologically and ethically considered in research. The positioning of researchers and as researchers in relation to participants or co-researchers plays a crucial role in what diversity aspect can be made visible, how insights are generated, and what consequences this knowledge generation has for the participants.

Especially in the context of organizational research, the organizations and their institutional embedding play an important role in categorization. In organizational research of social service organizations, categorization as a recipient often goes hand in hand with deficit and negative attributions. For example, the construction of "system busters" (Systemsprenger) or "youths with migration backgrounds" is organizationally promoted as it supposedly creates support or service offers and generates knowledge in the interest of the recipients. At the same time, these categorizations found in action fields normatively charge these lines of difference, potentially endangering and stigmatizing the recipients.

Reflection questions

The reflection questions aim to make diversity categories and their construction visible. Examples of such questions include:

- Which diversity categories are being identified and made visible in the research methods and instruments?
- What functions do these categories serve in research and in organizations?
- How is the allocation to these categories carried out? By whom?
- Do the diversity categories capture the complexities of intersecting categories?
- Do the categories contribute to the labeling and stigmatization of clients?
- Are participants informed about categories that are used?
- Are there options for self-assessments regarding categorization?
- Are there any risks associated with categorization for the participants and stakeholders?

4.2 Fostering inclusion

A critical approach to diversity secondly queries the processes of inclusion, which go beyond mere representation and focus on the potential influence on decisions. Against the backdrop of the new inclusive Child and Youth Welfare Act in Germany, for example, Schreiner and Schröder (2024, in press) suggest using questions to critically reflect on the inclusivity of

organizational cultures. To promote processes of double loop learning in organizations, where not only the achievement of set goals but also the goals themselves are questioned (Argyris, 1977), they propose two central dimensions of reflection: firstly, questions about the inclusion and exclusion of certain groups of people in decision-making processes, and secondly, about the legitimacy of decisions that affect others. We believe this reflection can also be translated into the process of diversity-critical organizational research.

Already in the planning of organizational research, it is important to consider who is part of the organization and which stakeholders are viewed as relevant to the organization's environment. It is also important to consider the diversity of all these groups mentioned. Organizational differences in status groups (e.g., employees vs. clients), age (e.g., adolescents in residential facilities), dependencies (e.g., hierarchies and responsibilities), or personality traits (e.g., reflective capacity, physical prerequisites, etc.) can affect participation and understanding of research. In this critical understanding, diversity is seen as the relation of the individual among the (potentially) participating persons in connection to their organizational setting. Depending on the positioning of these groups in the research process and depending on the methods used to generate and analyze data with these actors, different insights are generated. Recipients have long been not considered relevant actors in social service organizations because they did not have member status and were only seen as objects to be changed or as customers.

In diversity-critical research, therefore, it is essential to consistently question from the beginning who is able to participate in knowledge generation, what barriers might be created by the researchers and/or the research design itself, and—if these barriers cannot be ethically justified—how they might be dismantled. Although organizational research does not operate judgment-free, it is by no means value-free. This means that the results can directly or indirectly have repercussions on the various membership groups, recipients, and other stakeholders. Conversely, one may also ask what opportunities members of the organization have to opt out of the research process. In the spirit of double loop learning, which then initiates a constant questioning of the research process, a diversity perspective supplemented by the principle of inclusion has the potential to stimulate learning within and about the research process.

Reflection questions

The reflection questions aim to challenge role understandings and ensure the participation of all stakeholders in the process. Examples of such questions include:

- Whom do I consider as participants and as stakeholders in the process and whom not?
- Are all participants and stakeholders adequately informed about the project?
- How can these identified groups influence the research process?
- What intended and unintended effects does the research process, participation in the process and its results have on different groups?
- How can these groups raise awareness of possible effects?

- Are there organizational roles in place? Who decides about the roles? How can roles be changed?
- Are tools for communication and participation defined?
- Can non-participation without sanctions be ensured?
- Are participants and stakeholders informed about new developments?
- Who can access data and how?

4.3 Negotiating Justice

As shown above, social service organizations deal with conflicting visions of justice. These moments of tension are often not visible in organizational research when it focuses on a single group of actors or an organizational perspective. Over recent decades, it has become evident that these organizations have, for many years, dominated their clients by citing norms and values such as justice, discriminated against them, and in some cases even inflicted violence upon them. Both religiously affiliated homes and those with reformatory educational approaches have, under the guise of higher ideals, harmed their clients and caused long-term damage (see research on residential care homes in Germany during the 1950s and 1960s, on Odenwaldschule or on the experiment of pedophiles as foster fathers Andresen & Heitmeyer, 2012; Baader et al., 2024; Brachmann, 2019). Even though organizational research was not as widespread as it is today, the academic community repeatedly overlooked this structural injustice covered and caused by organizations (see also Ortmann, 2020). Although the cases mentioned are quite diverse, there are some notable analogies in that organizations exhibited dominant patterns of interpretation regarding justice which ultimately dominated or negated the understandings of justice held by children and adolescents or their families. This was also not the subject of research conducted by social work organizations and academia.

Creating diversity and fostering inclusion are necessary prerequisites making it possible to even articulate such conflicting visions of justice. Furthermore, throughout the entire research process, a conception is needed for how participants can incorporate their visions of justice regarding both the procedures and outcomes into the research process. This requires that conceptions consider the different types of research and what agreements have been made with the research participants: Research aimed at application and organizational change faces greater challenges in reflecting the different actors and their normative positions than do foundational studies. However, even for the latter, it is important that they reflect the value of their own research in light of the value judgments of other participants in order to avoid enforcing their own unchallenged notions of justice. This can also harm participants and other stakeholders of organizations. This is especially true for organizational research with groups that have already been discriminated against, for whom research results can also pose a danger as they can facilitate further discrimination (Dettlaff et al. 2018; Álvarez et al. 2022; López López et al., 2021).

Reflection questions

The reflection questions aim to reflect on the research background, ethics in the research process, and the specific methodological approach. Examples of such questions include:

- Are participants and stakeholders informed about the background, benefits, and social justice considerations of the research project?

- Can participants and stakeholders influence the composition of the research team and the decision of who conducts the research?

- Can the objectives of the research project be discussed and/or adapted based on the ideas of participants and stakeholders?

- Do all participants and stakeholders know about the methodology and, in particular, the data collection instruments?

- Are procedures established for negotiating research methodologies? Who can participate in these negotiations and how?

- Do participants and stakeholders have the opportunity to propose additional instruments or reject instruments that may have an impact on social justice?

- Are opportunities provided for the interpretation of data by participants and stakeholders?

- Are opposing viewpoints by participants and stakeholders incorporated into the data interpretation?

- Are procedures established so that participants and stakeholders can express critical opinions during the process?

- Are procedures established to discuss and change preliminary results?

5 Conclusion

The discussion on diversity and inclusion in organizations challenges our traditional method of doing research in social work in three dimensions. The first dimension is related to the construction of categories and the intersection of categories which we apply in research. Since social service organizations themselves are places of categorization, which can be contentious and powerfully enforced by professionals, the question arises as to how organizational research relates to this. This leads to a second dimension about how processes of categorization are shaped within organizational research itself. Since organizations and their members are much better trained and accustomed to enforcing their categorizations and thus exerting dominance, the question arises how the perspectives of clients or other stakeholders can be captured in the process. This leads to the third dimension about which norms and values are associated with such categorization. Reflecting on different, possibly conflicting, conceptions of justice is central to this. These three dimensions have not only a normative character, but also directly shape the research and knowledge creation process itself. If research fails to question and reflect on the relevancy and irrelevancy of certain categories, organizational research also risks reproducing such dominance structures of organizations.

With a focus on critical diversity research in organizations, we demonstrated that research on diversity must address ethical and epistemological questions. Both types of questions are tied to practices of inclusion and exclusion, which are crucial in the knowledge creation process within organizational research. From this perspective, researchers bear the responsibility to

develop and reflect on the research process in organizations, considering how actors can participate in this process and have opportunities to contribute their experiences and views on the phenomena being researched. When diversity is critically reflected upon within research processes, not only the researchers' attitudes but also research methods, methodologies, and the overall organization of research are brought into scrutiny and are subject to potential change. Procedures and moments of inclusion become guiding principles, enabling a co-creative research process involving academics, members of organizations, and the individuals intended to benefit from the social services.

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