



New Professionalism in Social Work - A *Social Work and Society* Series

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Introduction

Does professionalism have a future in social work or is de-professionalization the leading trend?

Throughout the world social welfare and social work are subjects of challenging trends and developments, which are critical to the concept and the opportunities of professionalism in social work. This situation raises theoretical as well as practical and political questions.

Starting with this number, *Social Work and Society* presents a series, that aims to contribute to a critical understanding of the underpinnings and prospects of professionalism in social work in the face of current challenges:

- (1) *The transformation of the welfare state*: The withdrawal of the state from responsibility for social problems and the social protection of its citizens, the introduction of workfare policies, the shift from un-conditioned entitlements to a system of “qualifying for assistance and services” has major impacts on the working process in social services, on the professional role of social workers and especially on the client/professional-relationship. Many concepts of social work see the client/professional-relationship as a major locus (or core) of professionalism in social work. If sanctions and unequally distributed power are dominating the client/professional-relationship – isn’t professionalism in its strict sense becoming abundant? If the clients’ best interest is no longer a center and a criterion of success to social work – can social work still be called a profession? How do social service workers cope with being expected to act as executors of sanctions instead of experts of empowerment? Are there opportunities for advocacy in a context of coercion and sanctions? How can they be used?
- (2) *The Managerialization of services* and the introduction of contracts and other market-instruments to the management of social service organizations and to the coordination between public purchasers and non-public providers (“New Public Management”, “New Managerialism”, Privatization) has instilled economic parameters and cost/benefit-criteria into decision-making in social services. Techniques of quality insurance and performance measurement have considerable potentials to narrow professional discretion, to affect the meanings of “good work” and to substitute the professional mode of case-logical application of knowledge and skills by rule-based working routines. If short-cut assessments, rationing of services and fulfillment of performance criteria becomes an everyday experience in social work practice, is the concept of “professional autonomy” still applying to social work?
- (3) *Evidence-based knowledge and evidence-based practice* are held to become a new corner stone of professionalism in social work. Social service organizations as well as individual social workers are increasingly expected to follow certain practices and programs labeled to have empirically proofed as efficient and successful. Efforts to promote „best-practice“

and „evidence-based practice“ – often enforced by central and local governments – have been viewed as being ambivalent. On the one hand they seem to bear opportunities to enforce the accountability of social services, to improve professional practice, and to highlight the often underestimated relevance of research in social work; on the other hand they seem to have considerable potentials to limit legitimate courses of action in social work practice, to narrow legitimate forms of knowledge (as well as legitimate ways of using knowledge) and to simplify the task of making choices in uncertain and unpredictable contexts. Does the evidence-based-practice agenda enhance tendencies to a standardization of social work? Are they leading to a loss of professional autonomy? Will they improve the public recognition of social work as a profession? Is there evidence that evidence based social work improves practical outcomes?

- (4) *Tendencies of de-professionalisation* of social service work have been witnessed in many welfare states and in many areas of social services. Professionally qualified social workers are increasingly directed and supervised by administrative positions or by professionals belonging to other professions. There are also tendencies to replace professionally qualified social workers by para-professional workers and to declassify professional social work positions. Where professionally qualified social workers still are in charge, an erosion of opportunities to professional discretion has become a frequently reported subject of experience. To where do these tendencies lead? What is the impact on the quality of services? What will be the consequences in terms of the future profile of social work as a profession? How do social work academics and practitioners respond to these developments?
- (5) *Is there a paradigm shift in social work professionalism?* Is what constitutes professionalism in social work subject of change? If there is a future for professionalism in social work – what is its core? What conditions and contexts are needed that give the opportunity to bring it out and to make it fruitful? What are the consequences for Social Work Education?

These questions are critically discussed against the background of a comprehensive analyses of the relations between professionalized Social Work and societal developments.

The series collects articles presented at an international conference on "New Professionalism in Social Work", held in October 2004 in Bielefeld (Germany).¹ The series attempts not only to provide reviews of the current situation, but also to assess if and to what extent new developments may indicate a new professionalism in Social Work.

This international debate, gathering experiences and positions from different nations, different cultures of welfare and social service work contributes to both a step forward in the theoretical understanding of “the case of social work” in the wider debate on “professions” and in the quest for adequate responses that may help to reassert social work’s potentials to promote citizenship and social inclusion.

¹ The conference was organized by Bernd Dewe (Institut für Pädagogik, Martin-Luther Universityät Halle Wittenberg), Hans-Uwe Otto (Center for Social Service Studies, Universität Bielefeld) and Stefan Schnurr (Fachhochschule Aargau Norwestschweiz, Department Soziale Arbeit); it was supported by the Ministerium für Schule, Jugend und Kinder des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, der Vereinten Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft Verdi (Bundesvorstand) und der Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft GEW (Hauptvorstand).

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Hans-Uwe Otto and Bernd Dewe

**Social Work
& Society**