

Researching social space in social work institutions. A case study on a women's shelter

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Introduction

Many services social work provides are linked to the spaces of institutions. Homeless people use the services of a day centre, children whose custody remains with the youth welfare services live in residential care live units, drug abusers make use of therapeutic treatment in a clinic and women who became victims of violence seek protection in a women's shelter. Social service users seek out institutions to make use of their infrastructure and the (e.g. educational, therapeutic, etc.) benefits offered on-site. (Diebäcker/Reutlinger 2018a, p. 21) We are convinced, that a spatial-relational perspective on institutionalised social work services helps to grasp the societal structures and their influence on processes of institutionalisation in social work practice. By applying this perspective, the social proceedings and the actual being and doing of staff and service users can be analysed and reconstructed as relational and spatial practices. Social orders are made visible and thus can be reflected as an interplay between built, social and experienced space. Through this, the perspective on professional actions in situations and settings is shifted, can be approached differently and new insights might be found. (Diebäcker/Reutlinger 2018b, p.17).

The starting point of our research project was our interest in institutional spaces as subjects of professional social work practice, in which social services, professional support and the service users' everyday lives are highly interlinked. Additionally, we assumed that an analytical perspective on social space inside social work facilities is hardly formulated, let alone published. Thus, we launched a comprehensive literature review of current Germanophone and Anglophone specialist literature about institutional spaces and research on social space in varying fields of social work (Fischlmayr et al., 2016). This research process was funded by the equity capital of the University of Applied Sciences - FH Campus Wien. We found the Germanophone and Anglophone publication landscape to be relatively limited regarding our topic of research. Our conclusion was that an analytical socio-spatial approach to organisational and institutional research in the fields of social work is not to be found – apart from a few exceptions (e.g. Cloke et al 2010, DeVerteuil/Wilton 2009, Conradson 2003 see also articles in Diebäcker/Reutlinger 2018, Meuth 2017). It also became apparent that there are only very few research methods that explore social interactions and the social fabric in their spatial interrelatedness “on-site” (Fischlmayr et al., 2016, p.98-99).

As a result, we made these institutionalised practices and social dynamics inside social work facilities the centre of the second phase of our research project. This second phase consisted of three case studies which we carried out using an ethnographical participatory approach: the

first case study was on a day centre for un-insured homeless people in Vienna (Sagmeister et al., 2017, Diebäcker et al. 2018), the second one was on a women's shelter for victims of domestic violence and the third one was on an addiction treatment centre. In this article, we will present excerpts of our case study on the women's shelter run by the association "wendepunkt" in Lower Austria, and thus allow an insight into our results and the research approach we followed. Some of our findings have already been published in a German article in 2016 (Diebäcker et al., 2016). The basis of the article we present here was planned as initial release for *Social Work & Society*, but due to the duration of the reviewing process, it was meanwhile published in a German edited collection in 2018 (Fischlmayr et al., 2018).

First, we will reflect on gender(ed) spaces in relation to the shelter (2) and explain our methodical approach (3) alongside our socio-spatial understanding of institutions (4). This will be followed by the presentation of findings from our case study: the women's shelter (5). This section focuses on several results we found to be especially relevant. In conclusion, we will discuss some socio-spatial aspects regarding spaces of institutional social work (6).

We want to thank the staff in the researched facility for supporting our project by providing resources, information and dedication. And of course, the service users, for allowing us an insight into their everyday lives.

Women's spaces and women's shelters

The emergence of gender specific spaces and the spatial appropriation by their users are products of societal processes. Gender specific, hegemonic interpretive schemes influence the way public, private and institutional spaces are structured and organised – and they are (re)produced and enforced by the way we perceive these structures and how we act in them. The perception of security in public spaces, for example, is binarily encoded for men and women with the result that the experience and appropriation of these spaces differ from one another (Löw, 2001, p.173ff; Löw et al., 2008, p.152f). Sex and gender act as dividing factors in social institutions, in which men and women might often be spatially separated. Here, the rules of societal processes and reproductions of gender roles might apply differently or to another extent, since formative attributions like parenthood, occupations or sexuality cannot be lived or must be expressed differently (Schneider, 2008).

Women's shelters are an institutionalised example of a women's space. However, they are originally a civil project and a result of the claims and achievements of the 1970s women's movement (Zweite Frauenbewegung) (see e.g. Sommerbauer, 2004; Pollack, 2007). The movement's cause thus was led by the precept of "The Personal is Political" and aimed to make yet tabooed topics concerning women's experiences in the working space, at home, and in society subject of the discussion. One of these tabooed topics was domestic violence. Alongside these claims went the creation of women's spaces as collective spaces opposing male dominated power structures. They should act as counter-spaces in which women could share their experiences, gather new collective experiences, and rediscover female identities. (Pollack, 2007, p.143)

Women's shelters therefore initially were not organised by social workers, but came into being as self-organised, feminist and solidary spaces of refuge for women who were victims of domestic violence. Since the emergence of women's shelters, their organisational and professional settings have changed, and the extent to which children are affected by domestic violence has gained more attention (Maurer, 2012, p.318). In the light of the institutionalisation of state-aided women's spaces, it is questionable whether these initially

critical, feminist spaces might have lost some of their subversive power being “co-opted” into an extended capitalist-patriarchal state (Sommerbauer, 2004).

A current feminist debate on the access to women's spaces reflect upon their own practices of inclusion and exclusion along the lines of sex. Among the issues discussed is hiring male staff and allowing male children at the verge of puberty to accompany their mothers into women's shelters. Concerning the binary perception of “femaleness”, a qualitative study by Lorene Hannelore Gottschalk (2009) about transgenders and women-only spaces in Australia illustrates how the (non)recognition of gender identities leads to inclusion or exclusion from institutional spaces and services. Managers and employees who recognised MTFs (male to female transgenders) as women were more likely to admit MTFs to their facilities (Gottschalk, 2009). The majority of current practice seems to deny MTFs access to shelters, which disregards the vulnerable situation they are in as well as their gender identity.

From an analytical perspective – taking into consideration its protective and caring functions – a women's shelter does not appear to be a classical space of deviance with its excluding functions (Foucault 2006[1967]). However, it does bear a specific deviance in relation to the patriarchal societal normality: Under the cover of the state monopoly of violence in liberal societies, male oligopolies appeared “so that domestic violence has remained a publicly tolerated form of violence for many years” (Sauer 2004, p. 117). The process of establishing women's shelters can be understood as support for battered women, as well as a progressive countermovement against patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, the male-dominated hegemony is still visible in the financially precarious situation many women's shelters are in, as well as their development from a self-organised space to an institutionalised form of help. Up to this day, women's shelters represent an important force for a more just relationship in an asymmetrical power relation between genders and at the same time they stand for violent structures of societal normality.

Methodical approach and research method

Within our research project on social organisations as institutional spaces, we were specifically interested in the interrelation between social interactions and orders and their interrelation with spatial settings. Focussing on the situational-institutionalising dimension, we granted special attention to the social interactions and dynamics within the women's shelter as a space which constitutes itself (mainly) as a female gender arrangement. We followed an ethnographic qualitative approach and therefore decided to use participatory observation and unstructured interviews as our assessment tools (see e.g. Hitzler 2003; Lüders 2004; Lueger 2010).¹ By following this method, we hoped to gain various impressions of the social interactions “on-site”. The women's refuge was exclusively visited by female researchers, initially together, then alone on four dates at different times of the day within a month's time. After our observations, we drew up detailed protocols – for the most part it was possible to take notes during our visits within the facility or directly after. The process of writing more detailed notes and protocols predominantly took place outside the facilities.

As the women's shelter is a relatively small organisation, we were immediately recognisable as “outsiders”. We therefore introduced ourselves to the staff and the residents, who had been

¹ In the course of the last 15 years, ethnographic research approaches that focus on interactions and practices regained importance in the field of Germanophone social work. (Unterkofler et al. 2018, p. 7-8).

informed about the research project beforehand, and made our role transparent to them. It was thus not possible to withdraw from social interactions and take on a role as observers. Most observations were made through direct interactions and interviews with the residents and the staff. In retrospect, we think that the reciprocal identification as women and our respect and awareness of entering the residents' living space, led to an openness among the "observed". Over time – on the second and third day of assessment – the inter-personal insecurities seemed to decrease and therefore our (potentially biasing) influence on the situation of assessment also lessened.

The subject-related evaluation of data was done in several steps. The assessment protocols – consisting of descriptive and interpretive passages – were read and interpreted by all three authors shortly before creating a collective interpretation (multiple coding) within several meetings. At the end of these meetings, the results were noted and "openly" encoded. The "axial and selective" coding with the theory-driven categories (see 4.) we had developed beforehand, followed as the next step. Despite this theory-driven coding which is usually not a part of *Grounded Theory*, we generally followed its approach of interpreting data (Strauss, 1998, p.92-114).

Thinking institutional social work spaces in a socio-spatial way

We assume that a critical in-depth discussion on spaces of institutional social work including social dynamics within these institutions – and their impact on service users – has barely taken place. Among the many socio-critical articles and books we identified as relevant to our research subject in the course of our literature research, Erving Goffman's "Asylums" (1973[1961]) and Michel Foucault's writings on "Total institutions" (e.g. "Discipline and Punish", 1994[1976]) represent central points of reference. Goffman's and Foucault's ideas also play an important role in our theoretical reflections, because they provide many helpful categories and classifications. With the aspiration of developing a socio-spatial perspective of the analysis on spaces of institutional social work, we combined sociological perspectives on space with critical socio-scientific research on institutions.

For our socio-spatial analysis we developed our analytical categories alongside three inter-related dimensions that create social order in the respective social work facilities: space-relational order, social relations and strategies of appropriation, as well as social rules and norms and efforts to conform to these.

Socio-spatial orders

A multi-dimensional perspective of space is necessary in order to understand the inner socio-spatial order of a (social work) facility. First, the societal dimension – the social structure and interactions inside a facility mirror societal realities and relations. Societal hierarchies, positions and inequalities are physically concentrated in the facility's interior social space (Foucault (2006 [1967], p.322).² In our analysis, we call this dimension *societal relations of space*. Secondly, there is the *territorial relation of space* that describes the correlation between the facility's interior social texture and its environment. The third dimension is the *inner relation of space*. Social relations inside the facility are interrelated with the physical

² Regarding the general relation between societal space and physical-geographical space see also Bourdieu (1985).

space the facility provides – e.g. the facility's interior design and the rooms' furnishing have an impact on social interactions.

With reference to Erving Goffman (1973 [1961]), the separation of inner and outer world is an important conceptual pair by which one can investigate manifold aspects of transitions as well as processes of exclusion and inclusion. Concepts of borders, rites or rituals and entrances/exits are useful when portraying processes of demarcation in institutions. (see Van Genep, 2005 [1990]; Foucault, 2006 [1967]; Aeby/Berthod, 2011; see also articles in TSANTSA, 16/2011) Regarding social work, the concept of *threshold* is used to describe the high or low level of accessibility to welfare services the service users have.

Another significant analytical perspective for our research project is the interplay of *identity* and *personal space* (see Goffman, 1973 [1963], p.234-238). This personal or possessional space is not only to be understood as the physical possibility to withdraw/retreat from situations of publicity, exposure and control – and to find intimacy and privacy. It can also be the appropriation of items that are significant to the identity. This could be a “personal deposit” or “personal storage place” like a lockable suitcase or a locker that can be used to store important personal belongings. These deposits are decisive for a person's ability to guard their self-identification and identity. For many people in precarious situations their “personal space” has already been reduced to the bare necessities (or less) and is linked to experiences of severe loss (Fitzpatrick and LaGory, 2000, p.37-41; Goffman, 1973 [1961], p.31, 238f).

Social relations and appropriation

Spatial appropriation is essential to many social service users concerning the openness and accessibility of institutional culture. Appropriation defines an interplay between the subject and the object which is appropriated. It is a process in which “the subject as well as the appropriated object, respectively its meaning and ascribed function” (Hüllemann et al. 2018, p. 8) change. From a perspective of appropriation, space should therefore always be understood as relational and not already existent. At the same time, spaces are not constantly redefined by actions, but are “reproduced alongside known institutionalisations” (ibid.). Martina Löw (2001, p. 164) defines “institutionalised spaces” as spaces “in which the relational ordering established, stays effectual beyond one's own actions and results in standardised efforts of synthesis and spacing”. (Diebäcker/Reutlinger 2018a, p.34-35)

Interactions are reciprocal, correlating actions and are crucial to convey expectations, attitudes and opinions between subjects. For our analysis of social relations, interactions are essential since they reveal and symbolise inter-personal relations. Interactions make social representations, personal and professional relationships, power structures and hierarchies conceivable. While analysing social work spaces, it also appears important to us to differentiate between professional relations (staff – staff, staff – service users) and everyday relations (service user – service user).

In the range of encounters and interactions, the dynamics of conflict situations are especially visible, since they rapidly become the centre of attention – also on a spatial level. It is conflict situations that reveal collisions of interests and differences of opinion on what should be conceived as “normal”, approved or deviant. Distinctions, processes of othering and differing normative orientations come to light.

Social Norms and efforts to fit in

Regulations/Rules in institutions mostly appear in the shape of formalised *social norms* (e.g. house rules) and initially mark what is officially allowed and what is not. Formalised social norms and their implementation also refer to their scope and level of effectiveness as well as the application of sanctions against infringements. Considering that the relations between service users and staff in social work facilities are highly unequal regarding power, infringements can usually not be negotiated. Solely the staff can change rules or interpret them differently – service users cannot do this. Informal social norms however allow more flexibility and negotiation – depending on the respective institutional culture. These informal social norms often find themselves in between the conflicting priorities of equality/equal treatment and justifiable exceptions. Zones of institutional normality (Foucault, 2006 [1978], p.87-90) arise from this interplay of official norms and their actual implementation.

Service users perform enormous efforts to adjust to these institutional norms. Goffman, (1973 [1961], p.59-70) differentiates between *primary* and *secondary adjustment* - primary adjustment meaning the interplay of degrading punishing measures and beneficial rewards. Secondary adjustment, on the other hand, describes the emergence of informal hierarchies and social control which enable (some) service users to appropriate space and obtain privileges. Adjustment efforts and a lack of resistance/opposition on the part of service users do not translate into consent or approval with institutional practices – service users adjust to institutions because they are highly dependent on their services. (Diebäcker, 2016, p.210-211)

A women's shelter run by the association "Verein wendepunkt"

Europe's first women's shelter was founded in London in 1972 – other foundations followed in Great Britain, West-, Central- and Northern Europe, then in Southern- and finally in Eastern- and South-Eastern Europe in the 1990s (WAVE, 2004, p.7). The European network WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe) is active in 46 European Countries and aims to end all gender related inequality and violence. In 1978, Austria's first women's shelter opened its doors in Vienna – since then the number rose to currently 30 shelters (2017) in Austria, of which most are to be found in cities. However, the "Austrian NGO Shadow Report" (2016, p.54) states that there is an undersupply of women's shelter accommodations (of at least 8%), especially in rural areas of Upper Austria, Lower Austria and Styria.

The women's shelter at the heart of this case study was started by the association "Verein wendepunkt" in the Lower Austrian district of Wiener Neustadt in 1995. The association is part of the holding organisation AÖF – Association of Austrian Autonomous Women's Shelters. Wendepunkt is financed by federal Ministries, by the state of Lower Austria, by the city of Wiener Neustadt and other sponsors.³ The Shadow Report criticises that the state of Lower Austria signed an agreement on financing women's shelters, but did not legally anchor the funding – which leaves the association with the constant threat of being financially cut off (GREVIO Shadow Report NGO-Coalition 2016, p.54). Alongside the women's shelter the association also operates a women's counselling centre, women-specific psychotherapy and programmes for knowledge transfer. Although the association has a manager, the hierarchies – in the tradition of the women's movement – are kept flat, and the team, consisting of three

³ Homepage wendepunkt, 19.02.2017 http://www.wendepunkt.or.at/verein_finanzierung.htm

social workers and a social pedagogue, who is responsible for the children and teenagers, works closely together.

The shelter provides six safe accommodations as well as counselling and support for women and children affected by domestic violence. Alongside of temporary housing, the women (and children) can make use of legal counselling, accompaniment to authorities, support in finding work and housing, as well as crisis intervention concerning experienced violence. The children and teenagers are supported by a contact person who advocates their rights and interests and helps them in dealing with the violence they experienced. (Brochure Women's Shelter, 2010, p.1-5) Additionally, an external male social pedagogue works with the children and teenagers several times a month. (F1:2)

Security and where to draw the line

Since the main precept of a women's shelter is the safety of its residents, men and violent persons are not entitled to access the facility. The shelter's address thus must be kept secret by the residents, employees, and people who know about it. Safety measures such as cameras and an alarm system facilitate the surveillance of the entrance area and convey a feeling of security and control to the residents and employees. If a person identified as a potential threat is in front of or attempts to enter the building, the video footage is directly transmitted to monitors in the housing area and the working area – the police can be alarmed if necessary. However, we observed that the offices' windows usually are used for monitoring the entrance area on a day-to-day basis, and the cameras mainly act as amplifiers for a sense of security. (F1: 3; F3: 2f; F5: 4) Judging by what the employees told us during our observations, keeping the address completely secret seems to be impossible. The insecurities this information evokes is openly discussed among employees and residents. Due to this open and trusting communication and the reliable relations between residents and employees, a sense of security can emerge among the involved parties (enabling them to handle a certain amount of remaining insecurity). (F5: 1)

Creating a balance between the relatively high internal security in the shelter and a self-determined everyday life for the residents is a common effort that needs constant negotiation between all people involved. The employees seem very committed to maintain as much physical security as possible while enabling utmost psycho-social stabilisation, e.g. through guarding external contacts. The necessity of weighing up security risks against the residents' room to manoeuvre creates confidence between one another and supports residents in taking on responsibilities. An example: resident kids can invite friends over for their birthday party inside the facility after coordinating this with the social pedagogue. (F5: 1-3; F2: 8; F3: 3)

Regarding outward demarcation, the shelter does not come across as "closed off". Under certain circumstances, groups of persons who bear reference to the women's shelter are granted access to the facility. These groups range from researchers (like us) to interns, volunteers working night shifts, and former residents, who make use of the follow-up support provided by the employees. (F1: 3; F2: 8; F4: 4) External persons can, however, only access communal spaces in the facility, and their right to enter is limited.

From a spatial perspective, it becomes apparent that domestic abuse in the private, familiar sphere represents a constant threat to the victims and thus renders public spaces potentially dangerous as well. This potential danger seems omnipresent and is confined only by the safe space the women's shelter provides, which highlights the spatial relationality of a safe inside and a potentially dangerous outside for residents. The outward demarcation, however, is not

rigid or enclosing, but characterised by permeability, which enables anyone permitted within the refuge (residents, staff) to exit anytime, but limits the access to the shelter exclusively to those permitted. In addition, the seemingly ubiquitous threat can be fragmented and patches of safety gained by women participating in public life. This can be facilitated by a high outward permeability and professionals encouraging women to use and occupy public space for everyday lives, whilst being mindful of and managing remaining risks.

Residing and Staying in the Shelter

During the time of our inquiries, five of the six accommodations were occupied, three of the resident women were living with their children, one resident was pregnant. At that time, all residents had some kind of migration background – four of them migrated themselves – whereby their residency in Austria varied greatly in length and nature. Two women were working steady jobs. Some of the women's previous place of main residence was nearby the facility, others had moved to the women's shelter from other states and cities and therefore had to adapt to an entirely new environment. (F2: 2, 5, 10; F3: 2; F4:2)

The following excerpts of the residing women's living circumstances exemplarily clarify some parameters influencing the length and circumstances of their stay in the shelter. The excerpts show that the women's different social relations and contacts as well as their personal resources influence their sojourn in the shelter as well as their coping strategies throughout this experience.

One of the residents had been living in an accommodation for homeless women and children before moving to the women's shelter and stated that she appreciates the current flexible structures, which allow her to pursue her half-time job and look for an apartment. A young woman we rarely encounter during our research was enrolled in educational training and had her mother, who was living nearby, look after her child during classes. Another residing woman was legally dependant on her former partner and perpetrator since her residence status was linked to him. We mostly met her in the shelter's kitchen due to her scarce social contacts outside the shelter and the threat of encountering her perpetrator on the outside. Apart from shopping for her daily needs, she only rarely left the facility. (F2: 5-7; F3: 4; F4:1; F6: 1)

The length, frequency and strain during the stay at the women's shelter appear to be shaped by the potential threat the perpetrator still poses, isolation as a form and result of domestic violence, by social, economic and linguistic resources the women possess, as well as by their legal status (e.g. residence status) (F4: 2). The employees explain that the increase of rents, poor job prospects for (aging) women with little education, and illegalised residence statuses lead to ever extending sojourns in the women's shelter.

Considering the length and frequency of the facility's residents, the impact of multidimensional discrimination and social inequality become apparent. Women who are especially at risk of becoming victims of violence due to their poverty, nationality, origin, age or disability, are also more dependent on the services of women's shelters.

Possibilities of spatial appropriation

The women's shelter can be roughly segmented into two areas: an employee-dominated working area on the ground floor, and a living area, dominated and appropriated by the residing women and children. The possibilities and restrictions on how these areas can be entered by the two groups is shaped rather by everyday practice than through strict regulations. The lockable rooms the residing women share with their children represent the

only truly exclusive and private space the residents have in the facility. Before entering the shared space of the living area, the employees knock. This can be interpreted as a sign of respect for the women's and children's privacy. (F2: 2f, 8; F3: 2; F5: 3)

The kitchen is not only used for daily care work, but also functions as a meeting point and place of communication for the residing women. Despite its location in the living area, the employees also access the kitchen and thereby get in touch with the residents. The kitchen is also where the weekly house meetings take place. The house meetings serve as a context in which different topics are discussed and negotiated: these subjects range from personal (important personal events, current emotional state, feelings) to organisational topics concerning community life in the shelter (e.g. cleaning schedule) and general topics such as upcoming events (e.g. the re-landscaping of the communal garden). Despite the lacking exclusiveness and the relatively open-access to the kitchen, the residents seem to identify themselves with this space to the extent that they present themselves as hostesses (e.g. offering drinks) to the researchers. (F2: 4, 7; F3: 2, 4-5)

The garden represents a passage to the public sphere, from which it is separated by a sturdy, fairly high wooden fence. Residing children use the garden as a soccer field. If a ball gets kicked over the fence, it is brought back onto the grounds by an employee rather than by the residents. If children of former residents come to visit, they are often found playing with children currently living on-site. The garden also provides other possible uses. The residents relax, play and study in the garden and use it as a place of interaction with each other, visitors, and employees. These patterns of self-determined appropriation by residing women and children shape and transform the kitchen and the garden – transforming them into secure “intermediate” spaces of interaction and “home” (e.g. F2: 8ff).

The employees seek to involve the residents in the re-decoration of the garden – even though this undertaking may stand in conflict with the women's shelter's transitional character as a place of temporary sojourn. In our understanding, the high levels of possible appropriation and the facilitation of active involvement largely contribute to the residents' identification with the shelter – and counteracts possible effects of hospitalisation. (F3: 2, 5; F4: 6-7)

Implementation – Negotiation – Adjustment: the facility's norms and social structures

According to interviews with employees and residents – and according to the house rules – it can be stated that there are three major rules in the women's shelter: keeping the address secret, not granting access to the facility to potentially violent persons, and not consuming alcohol inside the shelter. A violation of these rules translates into a breaking of taboos and can be sanctioned by admonishing or even permanently expelling the violator. Numerous additional rules regarding everyday life are subject to discursive negotiation despite the written form of the house rules. (F2: 5; F4: 5f)

To exemplify this discursive way of implementing and interpreting rules we would like to depict the following two situations:

The first situation concerns the parental supervision the resident women have for their children, and which explicitly does not fall in the social workers' nor other residents' remit. As one woman is about to leave for work an employee asks her about the supervision of her son during her absence. Another woman resolves the situation by spontaneously agreeing to look after the child whose mother has not pre-organised a childminder. Both the employee

and the volunteering resident show flexibility, allowing rules to be bent to accommodate the situation. (F2: 10)

The second situation concerns the (collectively agreed upon) rules of comportment during the weekly house meetings. One of these rules is trying not to behave distractingly during the meetings – no eating or getting up during the discussions. While explaining these rules, the employee moderating the meeting explains that there will be an exception made for one of the residents, since she needs to attend a course directly after the meeting. The woman therefore is permitted to eat and prepare her things during the meeting – without breaking the rules. (F3: 4)

The observed situations bare a potential for individual adjustment of norms to the women's actual living situations and thereby also facilitate self-determination, flat hierarchies and thoughtfulness in interpersonal interactions. At the same time, they pose the threat of unequal treatment of – or the perception of being treated unequally among – the shelter's residents. Additionally, it must be stated that the changing of rules or the decisions on how (loosely or strictly) a norm is implemented remain – for the most part – within the employees' sphere of influence.

The strong bonds and interrelatedness among the women and children are enforced by the small size of the facility. This closeness does not necessarily lead to an atmosphere of solidarity, but highly depends on the current inter-personal dynamics and relationships.

The employees observe different forms of identification and alliances among the women: some tend to solidarise with the other residents "upstairs" in the living area, whereas the others rather ally themselves with the employees "downstairs". At the same time, disagreements "downstairs" between the employees seem to influence community life "upstairs" among the residents. The employees therefore seek to reflect their own roles and power positions – and their possible effects on the residents. One possible effect being that residing women and children could refrain from criticism and resistance in order to avoid conflict or negative consequences in the inter-personal relationships. (F2: 7; F3: 4; F4: 5f; F6: 1)

Solidarity, Bodies and Emotions: Aspects of professional feminist relationship work

The "back-breaking work" (Knochenarbeit) (F1:1) the founders of wendepunkt had to put into the establishment of their association as a place of feminist practice indicates the personal commitment and active involvement for the feminist cause and towards political change of those people involved. Alongside their political and social activism, the founders of wendepunkt tried to provide a place of empowering support to the women residing in the shelter.

The current team is still committed to these two principles. Firstly, the inward support by employees providing personal contacts and/or belongings (e.g. furniture) and getting their personal and professional networks (e.g. math-tutor for one of the residents) involved to support the residents, if necessary. Secondly the outward activism by promoting political topics concerning the residents by attending conferences, building networks with other organisations and acting as agents for the women's interests towards decisions makers. Raising awareness for domestic violence is key to the organisation. Generally, values such as solidarity, supporting one another, and upholding an autonomous organisation seem to shape the team's professional practice. Improving the women's situations is at the centre of the

numerous efforts on the part of the employees. (F2: 7; F3: 5; see also brochure "wendepunkt", 2012, p.7-8)

Regarding the personal interaction between employees and residents, we noticed a high level of physical closeness. This could be observed in friendly and welcoming greetings, encouraging pats and touches, or by providing physical "stability" in crisis situations (offering a shoulder to lean on). (F4: 1, 7; F5: 5) To us, the physicalness and emotionality established by the employees in interactions with the residents represented a form of professional bonding and relationship work. This may be understood as a personal quality or as a strategy to build or strengthen relationships that impart empathy and solidarity towards the residing women. Provided that this emotional work is critically reflected in its power-structures and its possibly manipulating character, we experienced it as an important part of professional practice in the women's shelter.

Solidary feminist work is based on the assumption that all women are subject to structural disadvantages and discrimination as well as a heteronormative gender-related predefinition of roles and functions. The residing women and the employees as their advocates also share experiences with certain authorities and administrative bodies which disregard the residents' difficult living circumstances in their decisions (F4: 1). Apart from these unifying aspects, there are also factors that draw a distinction between the residents and the employees. These distinguishing factors range from the current living and housing situation and respective hardship, over personal and financial resources and education, to their legal residence status. All these factors – alongside the key differentiator in the shelter: professional worker vs. service user – need to be (and are) seen and considered as asymmetrical power relations by the employees.

A concluding discussion of our findings

Our findings show that the women's shelter serves as a space of refuge for its users in their respective difficult life-situations. Individual and societal problems condense within the facility and become spatially visible on the interior. These individual and societal problems can also be summarised as social exclusion – such as exclusion from social entities like family and welfare state. The experiences of exclusion and risk potentials the service users make in public and personal spaces (e.g. at home), is manifested inside the social work facility. Societal and territorial relations therefore become effective in social spatial relations.

Regarding the demarcation or the barriers of access, the association "wendepunkt" running the women's refuge shows enormous efforts to keep the permeability high and the threshold low for its residents. The handling of the house rules – which, according to Goffman (1973 [1961]: 59-70), is the interplay of a system of reward and punishment and leads to a variety of adaptational behaviours – can be understood as a practice of demarcation. The demarcation is set by the regulation of who enters and leaves the facility and therefore marks the dividing line between the inside and the outside. We perceived a sensitive and user-centred interpretation and implementation of institutional norms by the trained staff. The reflective handling of one's own practices of demarcation and the awareness of one's own stereotypes and fears, appear to be crucial criteria for professional practice. In their study on tendencies to lock doors in psychiatric institutions in Great Britain, Len Bowers and others (2008, p. 109-111) indicate that it is often the staff's feelings of insecurity that cause growing regimentations and tightening of institutional rules.

Compared to larger women's shelters, that could be spatially characterised as "homes" or "residential houses" for women and children affected by domestic violence, the facility concerned could rather be understood as a "flat-sharing community". This is due to its smaller scale and composition, but also the facility's institutional "culture" that involves group activities and shared responsibilities. The fact that the women share their private rooms with their children, as well as the staff's largely unrestrained authority to enter the common areas, must be understood as cuts in the residents' privacy and autonomy. The mentioned institutional "culture" characterised by solidarity and empathy, is not only correlated to the facility's small capacity and the non-hierarchical team constellation among the staff. It is also based on feminist practice and the staff's social, professional and political beliefs and attitudes.

Generally, the interplay of "voluntary" cooperation, incentives and regimentations between users and staff inside the facility does not dissolve but remains a central criterion for the constituting of social relationships. Allowing users of social services who have experienced biographical ruptures throughout their lives to develop a "continuity of the self" inside social work facilities is only possible beyond the borders of "standard treatment", a conclusion drawn by Jari Pirhonen and Ilkka Pietilä in their study about retirement homes in Finland (2015, p.97). At the same time, it is vital to support the self-determined appropriation of space and to facilitate the emergence of institutional "personal space" for the users.

Our research perspective, as depicted in this article, pursued a social-spatial analysis of spaces of institutional social work. Social interactions and dynamics are at the centre of our analysis. An ethnographic qualitative approach proved to be especially advantageous in pursuing this kind of analysis. Furthermore, it is important to expand this "internal view" by an "external view" and thus include the structural framing, societal aspirations and political demands and strategies. This can be done by combining a critical discourse analysis with the ethnographic qualitative approach. (Diebäcker/Reutlinger 2018c) While doing so, one must consider the interdependency between (active) institutionalising and (structural) institutional dimensions in order to reveal regularities and discrepancies (Aeby/Berthod, 2011, p. 11f).

Sources to the women's shelter of the association "wendepunkt"

F1: Protocol of participatory observation on the 10.05.2016

F2: Protocol of participatory observation on the 23.05.2016

F3: Protocol of participatory observation on the 24.05.2016

F4: Protocol of participatory observation on the 08.06.2016

F5: Protocol of participatory observation on the 22.06.2016

Hausordnung (*house rules*) in the women's shelter wendepunkt (effective: June 2016)

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