

Participation as power struggle – researching the labour process in the residential child and youth care in Germany

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1 Introduction

The research project „geste“ (Educational Aids as Work on the Common Good - Between Effect-Oriented Management and Equal Participation in Germany and England), funded by the German federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) started in spring 2020 and investigates participation in child and youth care as an aspect of the welfare state arrangements in Germany and England. There are two subprojects A) focuses on participation of clients and B) focuses on participation of social workers. This article is related to subproject B) and thus discusses the issue of participation of the social workers concerning their working conditions from sociology of work a point of view. As the main empirical phase has not started yet, this article presents the theoretical outlines as there is a distinct difference between the definitions of participation when it comes to the discipline of social work versus sociology of work. Participation is essential to child and youth care, not only as a tool for empowerment and education for democracy of the clients (from a social work perspective), but also as a key element for the wellbeing at work of the social workers. Participation with regard to the working conditions in general is widely recognized as a main characteristic of working conditions. It even appears as one of eleven key elements of “good work”, a concept that is defined by the DGB (German Trade Union Federation). This concept is the foundation of an annually carried out representative survey, which measures the working conditions of employees in Germany (Institut DGB-Index Gute Arbeit, 2019). A distinct evaluation of this data by GEW (the union for education and science) shows, that participation is especially relevant for the social workers as most of their work processes are highly participative, while at the same time they work under highly precarious conditions regarding payment, workload and working time (Henn et al., 2017, pp. 30–37).

It seems, as there are certain limits to participate in the labour process. This raises the question about the characteristic of participation in the specific labour process: Is this a means for the workers to get a better hold of their working environment or does it rather work as a management tool for activating the employees and increase the company’s profit? Over the course of the research project, the question about meaning and significance of participation from a workers’ perspective in residential child and youth care will be pursued and answered. The present article will outline the theoretical background for this investigation, by referring to a terminology that was coined by sociology of work. With this definition, the immanent tensions of child and youth care that are a product of economic pressure under capitalistic conditions will be traced as questions of autonomy and power distributions between workers and employers. In addition, a state of the art concerning participation in German child and youth care will be depicted in order to map out the research questions drawn from these tensions.

2 Foundations of participation in German child care and in sociology of work

Understanding the divergent emphasises on the topic of participation between social work and sociology of work, the following paragraphs will highlight the most prominent disciplinary differences in order to carve out the contributions a sociological stance can make.

2.1 Genesis of participation in Germany child care

The German debate on participation in child and youth care dates back to the 1970ies when the classical residential care got under critique and new concepts and forms of self-organised and self-determined living for young persons were elaborated. The idea of education for independence and self-responsibility was put into practice, e.g. by establishing advisory boards that encompassed young persons in care who then participated in debates about pedagogic, organisational and economic topics of the respective organisation (Stork, 2003, p. 436). However, it was not until the 1990ies that the term participation really entered centre stage in child and youth care. With several amendments, participation of clients was fixed as a central maxim within child and youth care in Germany and sometimes even became a yardstick for the success of certain policies (see. AG Präventive Jugendhilfe, 1995; Petersen, 1999, cited in Stork, 2003, 438 f.). There has also been a debate about terminology (participation, partaking, stipulation) that hints to different levels of involvement and hence different kinds of power distribution between the clients and the professionals (Scheu & Autrata, 2013, p. 76). Participation really advanced to a means as well as a goal within social work generally during that time (Schnur, 2018, p. 633). The theoretical foundations for legitimising this shift in social work were found in the concept of living environment orientated social work (Thiersch, 2002, p. 137), in defining social work as persons related service (Olk & Otto, 2003) and in the relation between education and democracy (Richter et al., 2016). Within this realm, participation has been elaborated in detail concerning the clients of child and youth care. Being very much the backbone of social work in child and youth care in Germany, it is slightly surprising that not much focus has been laid on the social workers themselves and how they (can) participate in co-creating their workspace and working conditions in other areas than with respect to their clients.

2.2 Participation in sociology of work

Because of the before mentioned, it is helpful to turn to another discipline, which critically analyses the labour process: sociology of work. Due to the different theoretical and historical backgrounds of social work and sociology of work, there are different understandings of the concept of participation. The background for social work has briefly been sketched in the previous paragraph. For sociology of work, the meaning of participation has originated from the development of different production systems and ideologies, but can be and has been applied any other fields where people work and are exposed to questions of autonomy and power distribution between worker and employer. The role of employee participation in the labour process is one of the oldest discussions when it comes to organising the labour process. This debate about participation can be traced back to Frederick Winston Taylor and his ideas of scientific management (Taylor, 1911). The key aspect of this organisation of the labour process was the separation of headwork from handiwork, meaning that the ordinary employees were excluded from the organisation of the labour process. This idea was born out of an antagonistic understanding of the needs of the employers and the employees. While, in this model, the employers are expected to have a strong interest in producing as much as possible in a given time, the employees are expected to have a strong interest in working as little as possible. For Taylor this was “natural behaviour”. To resolve this conflict to the

benefits of the employers, Taylor created a method, which made sure that the employees had no power over the entire labour process, but just followed the given instructions.

Of course, labour processes on the shop floors of the late 19th century vastly differ from the labour processes of today's social services, especially when applying the lenses of another discipline. Nevertheless, the basic meaning of the term participation in sociology of work has been formed by those early debates. Participation is therefore understood as the direct influence of employees on the labour process (Becker & Brinkmann, 2013, p. 388). Along with such an abstract definition of participation arises a problem, because participation appears as a general characteristic of a labour process: Either this process is organised in a way that employees can participate in it, or it is organised in a way that they are not permitted to participate. This understanding of participation is highly problematic because it conceals that in fact employees must participate to a certain degree (even in a highly formalised working context like tayloristic production lines) to make the labour process work, which shifts the perspective from a mere formal participation to informal structures and actions. Looking closer at tayloristic labour processes, which are designed to minimize the influence of the employees on the labour process, we see that it is impossible to strip the employees from all of their power over the labour process simply because informal knowledge and structures are important to keep the labour process running (Burawoy, 1986; Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2017). This becomes even more obvious, when taking another defining characteristic of the capitalistic labour process into account: the transformation problem. Transformation of abstract labour power in concrete labour cannot be done simply by defining the labour process on an abstract level. This is because it is impossible to foresee and determine every possible problem, which an employee might need to face during a shift. The understanding, that participation to a certain degree is necessary and unavoidable for the functioning of any labour process, leads to an important question: Why is the role of participation in the labour process that important if it is a necessary part of it? One answer might be, that the way participation is organised (formal/informal) tells a lot about the relationship between employees and employers in a certain field and, on a more abstract level and as well describes the status quo of the tension between capital and labour. For answering this empirical question, it is important to widen an understanding of participation to a point where this tension becomes a central aspect of participation itself.

Turning back to Taylor's scientific management, it becomes obvious that involving employees in the organisation of the labour process equals giving them opportunities to act autonomously. Along with those opportunities goes a shift in power. More precisely the employees are no longer just objects in the labour process, used by the management for increasing productivity, but they become subjects who can influence their everyday work life. Participation is thus often positively connoted because it is linked to empowerment in this realm. However, this empowerment meets its limits in the capitalistic constitution of society which still bears the already by Karl Marx mentioned basic antagonism between capital and labour. This has wide ranging implications for the employees participation in the labour process, because it is necessarily embedded in the power structure of a company.

Participation is deeply rooted in democratic societies. Citizens are encouraged to participate in the political and social processes. That is why it seems natural to link participation in economic decision-making to democracy. While it is true that the implementation of participatory structures in economical processes can be linked to a democratisation to a certain extend it is important to keep in mind, that there is generally no such thing as a truly democratic company and that participation itself is a double-edged sword.

Brinkman et al. (2014) argue that democratic leadership is a legal regime which is based upon the idea that equals get together in order to make a common decision. The power structure of an enterprise on the other hand is based on inequality, employees can influence the decision-making, but the power structure of a company will always be in favour of the management. Therefore, the authors conclude, there can indeed be democratic structures within a company, but there cannot be a democratic company (ibid.: 125-127). Through the increasing of contract-based and temporary work, this topic becomes even more problematic, because it results in a weakening of the work councils (ibid.: 128 f.) and hence the institutionalised participation structures within a company. This is why Kißler et al. (2011) point out, that participation cannot truly challenge the power structure of a company even though participation of workers is even mandated in German law. As a cornerstone of industrial relations in Germany, delegated employee participation procedures are regulated by law. Accordingly, scope and the degree of participation are limited with only a truly equally composed supervisory board in the coal and steel industry. There is no such thing as employee participation rights in economic matters for the work council. There is merely a corrective right when it comes to introducing new technologies (ibid.: 42). So, in the end, there are always limits to the scope of influence that employees can execute.

The authors further argue, that participation in economic decisions is a tool for keeping workers in line (ibid: 38), which reveals the integrational character of participation. On the shop floor, this became true with the introduction of KAIZEN (a Japanese concept for a constant process of improvement) as a management tool for rationalisation in the early 2000ths. Participation turned from an empowerment tool of the employees to a tool for the management giving them a wider access to the subjective resources of the workers (Brinkmann & Speidel, 2006, p. 86). They became responsible for the rationalisation of their own labour process while simultaneously having to adapt to a managerial logic. This was even more intensified with the neoliberal turn enhancing and leading to internalization of managerial logics through the employees (Bröckling, 2007; Voß & Pongratz, 1998). Even though this internalization is suspected to not run seamlessly (Wolf, 2018, 207 f.), this shows that participation is not just a tool for democratisation and empowerment of the employees, but a great example for the dialectic field of tension which is characteristic for capitalistic societies (Kißler et al., 2011, p. 40). One characteristic of capitalistic societies is, that they constantly produce aspects of their own negation while internalizing those aspects to sustain themselves (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006). This is why Wolf argues, that a true democratic participation on the shop floor level would have to question the capitalistic mode of production itself (Wolf, 2018, p. 201). Of course, work in industrial factories cannot be equated with the work process of persons' related services like the labour of social workers. Persons' related services in general and care work in particular are confronted with different challenges than activities in industrial manufacturing. The intersection of consumption and production, for example, emphasises other control mechanisms for quality assurance and gives workers more freedom, which, on the other side also requires an increased degree of self-control. At the same time, social workers are confronted with often precarious working conditions (Henn et al., 2017) and clear work-related demands are also articulated in care work (cf. Menz 2017). The question of the meaning of participation therefore arises for social work under special conditions, but it remains embedded in the general immanent conflict between self-realization and utilization.

Participation is therefore defined by this tension being empowering while being incapacitating at the same time. This understanding of participation as a power struggle places it on a macro

sociological level within an ongoing field of tension, which can emerge in multiple ways on a concrete empirical level. Hence, it is important taking a closer look at the empirical representation of those theoretical debates, in the geste-project this will be done with respect to case of social workers' working conditions.

3 Participation of workers in residential child care in Germany

The workers possibilities for participation in the labour process are not only relevant from a sociological point of view. A quantitative study conducted by Albus et al. found that participation of professionals also has positive effects on opportunities for actualisation of the young persons themselves (Albus et al., 2010: 159 ff). This calls for an examination of the professional's broader participation aspects. So, if we take a closer look at the work that has already been done in this respect, for the German case, there are two recent studies that focus on participation processes of professionals related to their working conditions.

Schierer (2018) investigates the implementation of a new guideline model in a larger organisation. By guideline interviews she asked 18 persons (group home managers, professionals and psychological service) to what extent professionals participate during that process and found that participation was rather fragmented in this case and strongly depended on the respective manager: only if the manager was inclined to the concept of participation, it was applied. Küchler investigated participation practices of professionals within the realm of introducing the social space and living environment orientation as new service regulation and advancement in child and youth care. She conducted eight associative interviews and leads workshops where she found that for the professionals there is no non-participation and that they think that confirming, enlarging, criticising and making things more precise ("imitating") and sticking to the existing logics without creating something ("new") is participation (Küchler, 2018, p. 85). In other respects she describes a power struggle between the youth welfare service on the one hand and the professionals on the other hand that leads to a mobilisation of the professionals against the youth welfare service (ibid.: 163). Küchler found a general sense of questioning existing rules and regimes and a "sensitive perception" among the professionals (ibid.: 172).

Apart from these rather focused works that highlight certain implementation processes in which participation was encouraged while something new was implemented, there is yet no study that takes into account the different levels of possible participation of professionals in co-creating their workspace and their working conditions. Furthermore, it is unclear how this intermingles with recent other trends in social work such as the ongoing debate about professionalization and the neoliberal turn. There is a debate about the influx of neoliberal implementations in social work, such as can be found in privatisation and performance-based contracting that results in problems like competition between institutions and insufficient service for the clients (Bain, 2008). Therefore, these tendencies of economisation on the institutional-organisational level in fact oppose to the individual problem situations of the clients and the respective care plans (Brand, 2017). Brand also interprets this as one of the most influential current processes in the profession that has to be dealt with by the social workers: in her study, the administrative frameworks are perceived as constitutive, yet paradoxical by the professionals who, despite of those facts, do not perceive themselves as vicarious agents for the frameworks (ibid.: 215). Mohr refers to the broad trend of managerialism as a threat to the crucial debate about professionalization within social work as they tend to follow different logics that oftentimes oppose each other: management ideas pursue rationalisation and cost efficiency while the professional ethics of social work pursue the wellbeing of the client (Mohr, 2017).

Sanders/Bock regard the increased need for efficiency as a call for more participation of the professionals. They deduce that service offers these days have to be planned as well as prospectively calculated and hence the actual on the job knowledge of the professionals is needed for that. So fulfilling the requirements of a competition and performance based funding substitutes tayloristic management styles with achievement orientated management, which is best implemented by teams or project groups (Sanders & Bock, 2009, p. 10). In the debate about social work being a “job” for either putting into practice social or welfare state values or fulfilling organisational requirements by learning certain techniques/methods and social work as a “profession” being rather based on scientific functioning (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018, p. 22), neoliberalistic tendencies put pressure on social work as a profession.

So summarizing the existing literature on professionals’ participation concerning their working environment/conditions, for the German case, there is only few texts that deal with involvement in implementation processes as mentioned above. Generally, the professionals are called to facilitate the participation of the clients as means and goal. Especially in child and youth care in Germany, there is the idea of building democratic competencies by exposing the young people to democratic structures such as voluntariness, openness and discursive settings (Sturzenhecker, 2005, 135 ff.). This is to be induced by the professionals to the clients, but there is not much evidence that the professionals (or anyone else) much cares about kinds of involvement, participation und stipulation for the sake and beneficial work-life-balance of the professionals themselves. Despite the inevitable awareness for this topic, there seems to be no spill over effect of participation as a goal, only as a means for smoothening implementation processes of new management/organisational strategies or fulfilment of requirements introduced or made necessary by managerialistic procedures.

The outline of the geste-project is to fill the void concerning participation of professionals for their working conditions by investigating the different possible levels of participation.

4 Research questions

Understanding participation as power struggle acknowledges that different aspects have an influence on modes and areas of participation. As mentioned before, the logic of these aspects contradict each other and in doing so fuel tension which manifests in the organisation of the labour process. Three distinct aspects of participation appear to be most relevant for this tension: participation as longing (of the workers), participation as coercion (by the employers) and limits to participation.

Participation as longing (of the workers) acknowledges that participation in a work context means that workers can in fact design and shape their workspace according to their own ideas and needs, which can be a positive attribute. What is not known so far is what the actual needs and ideas of the workers in child and youth care are. The objective working conditions are comparably bad (e.g. low wages, extensive working hours), but at the same time not much labour dispute is openly fought out. This gives a hint, that the objective working conditions, which should characterize good work and the ideas about good work of the employees, are not at the same for everybody. What these specific concepts might be, has to be investigated in the specific work and the respective actions. Therefore, it is important to find out what good work actually means for the employees and how these concepts relate to participation. Is it possible that there is a connection between a high degree of participation possibilities and the low openly fought out labour dispute? With this question in mind the concrete working action of the employees comes into focus and furthermore the question for the importance of informal and formal structures.

Participation as coercion (by the employer) is to be understood as a management tool that has especially flourished under the neoliberal turn and is strongly connected to structural factors in the respective organisation. Among these, the organisational culture (as can for example be found in hierarchies or the tendency to hire workers with a certain educational background that can encompass different levels of critical attitudes) most probably influences this aspect. The general idea here would be to grant liberties in order to make use of them for the company's benefit by enhancing personal commitment of the workers and skim the added value. According management practices are the fostering of flexibilisation and dissolving direct control for example through the implementation of trust-based working time for some work-related tasks. Of course, this does not mean that there is a lack of control because the employer still examines the results of the working process.

As discussed before the shift from participation as a tool for empowerment of the employees to a management tool for rationalisation had an important impact: participation is no longer something which is implemented against the will of the management, but which is in extreme cases enforced by it. Therefore, it is important to find out which role participation plays within the day to day labour process. Is it a tool for empowerment, a tool for rationalisation or both? Furthermore, it can be important to understand which role managerial thinking and market influences play for the perception of the labour process of the employees.

Limits to participation can be found and explained when taking into account that even if participation as opportunity to create something or as coercion to adding subjective value is enabled or possible, it does not necessarily have to take place. Therefore, if the personal life context is considered, workers do have other non-work-related obligations and needs that they will have to follow and that might interfere with calls for intensification from the work sphere. So, withholding their capacities can arise from a work-life-balance aspect, but it can also be a deliberate action out of power considerations. As shown, there are numerous cases in sociology of work from other contexts, where workers did not want to give away their specific knowledge in order to maintain their very job or the informal hierarchical position. If there are limits to participation, they must be elaborated to understand how and if they are connected to the idea of good work. They also draw a bigger picture of the embeddedness of good work in a concept of good life. While this subproject surely cannot evaluate all of it, we have the chance to give an outlook of the influence of non-work-related aspects on the concrete labour action.

5 Conclusion, limits and future

As elaborated in this article, the geste-subproject of sociology of work will focus on the research gap concerning participation processes of social workers with respect to their working environment and working conditions. There is a distinct difference between the definitions of participation when it comes to the discipline of social work versus sociology of work. As the former strongly refers to certain ideas about education for democracy and the latter rather refers to questions of autonomy and power distribution between workers and employer in a set contractual frameworks. Applying the critical lens of sociology of work, the investigation of the subproject of geste will take place on three levels, that is a) the perspective of the workers as a participation as longing, b) the perspective of the employer as participation as coercion and c) the limits to workers' participation. Due to the early stage of the project, the investigation has not reached full momentum. In a later moment, analyses of the English case and it's again different historical background in social work and adherent issues will be discussed and published for full comprehension of the project. One relevant aspect for the comparison is that in the UK NHS (National Health Service), the aspect of

participation has an even higher relevance than in Germany and the question is what are enabling or hindering structures for putting it into practice and what each country might learn from the other. According research will be done in a main field phase in 2021 and the evaluation and transfer into work relevant areas, such as e.g. unions and politics, will be done in 2022/23. The analyses will be done comparatively with data from Germany as well as England tracing similarities and differences in order to find good practice examples. The research design has a qualitative outline, has started by expert interviews and a document analysis in order to assemble case studies of social workers' participation framework for Germany and England. In a second step, roughly 60 qualitative employee interviews will be done in both countries. Over the course of the project, different formats of transdisciplinary involvement will be put into practice, facilitating communication between the relevant stakeholder groups: clients, social workers, as well as the institutional and political sphere.

An extraordinary and unexpected challenge is the global pandemic that has started almost simultaneously with this research project. The pressure that this situation puts of social workers and their working conditions is immense and the ability to despite all of that and the according side effects will certainly influence the project's work in a yet unknown way.

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