

2. Service User Involvement – Social Work Projects and Education with a Gap-Mending Approach in Europe

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Overview of Theoretical Background and Evaluation

Theoretical Background

The gap-mending approach is based on the user involvement approach. There is general consensus that the theoretical background has not been concisely and systematically compiled until now (e.g. Askheim 2003). It can be observed that authors writing about user involvement refer implicitly or explicitly in quite different ways to empowerment, inclusion, participation, democracy, social movements, intersectionality and capability (as e.g. Schön 2015; Beresford/Carr 2012; Beresford 2013; McLaughlin 2009). However, these authors point out that the theoretical references have many common points and are difficult to define precisely in contrast to each other. Therefore, it is difficult to clearly delineate the theoretical frame of the gap-mending approach. These authors conclude that it would be advisable to differentiate between different backgrounds and individuals.

However, the user involvement approach and gap-mending approach are situated in the same theoretical paradigm of social work, which is known as critical or reflective social work. This theoretical understanding of social work is present in both English (Fook 2012; Fook 2002) and German-speaking countries (Dewe/Otto 2012; Dewe 2009; Dewe/Otto 1996) and includes a paradigm shift of social work, where the role and perspective of service users gain crucial importance (cf. next section). Social work in practice, education and research is seen as a reconstructive reality and therefore it cannot be understood well enough with a more objective or standardized approach. Thus, an active participation of service users in practice, research and education of social work and an ensuing look at their perspective will increase the understanding of their situations.

Researchers highlight the following characteristics of the user involvement approach (c.f. as e.g. Beresford/Carr 2012; Schön 2015; McLaughlin 2009):

- the understanding of single life situations
- the success of co-operation between service users and social workers
- the decrease of the power hierarchy
- the development of innovative and sustainable programs.

There are points of similarity in theoretical approaches in both English and German-speaking publications.

In the following sub-chapter, the strengths and limitations of three relevant terms of user involvement, service users and empowerment are presented.

User Involvement

The term “user involvement” is often used without definition. Schön (2016) confirms this in her systematic analysis of 699 scientific articles about user involvement (in practice and in education of social work) published between 2007 and 2013. She found that user involvement was implicitly linked to a power dimension and the hierarchy of control in McLaughlin’s work (McLaughlin 2009). However, the common term user involvement was not defined in detail (Schön 2016: 27). In general, it seems to be self-evident that the term is comprehensible, clear and correct, when this is far from true (Beresford/Carr 2012; Schön 2016: 27). The definition of user involvement has “to be considered more carefully” (Beresford/Carr 2012: 27). Before trying to define it, both authors emphasise the importance of linking the user involvement approach to an ideological, political and cultural context. This way, the concept cannot be used in every situation. This “technical” application of user involvement can be avoided by outlining the implicit context of “politics and political philosophy; democracy and power; of citizenship rights and responsibilities” (Beresford/Carr 2012: 21). However, the term is often separated from these contexts and “treated in isolation as a technical rather than ideological matter” (ebd.).

Schön (2016) argues in a similar way: The complexity of defining the concept of user involvement is due to the fact that it is underpinned by issues of power, culture and politicisation. In this sense, Schön explains that “the concept of user involvement and arguments around it can be related to three

areas, namely, democracy (Dahlberg/Vedung 2001), power and empowerment, and service development (McLaughlin 2011)” (Schön 2016: 22).

Beresford and Carr also stress the key terms of participation and power. They see the access and support of participation and power as two important components to achieve successful involvement (Beresford/Carr 2012: 29). The challenge is to involve more service users in practice, education and research of social work. This is usually an external initiative coming from the social workers’ side. However, they can only create favourable framework conditions for self-empowerment, but ultimately, the motivation needs to come from the service users themselves. Beresford and Carr call this challenge the “ambiguity of user involvement” and they explain it as follows: “keeping power from people – to hold on to power or to share it.” (Beresford/Carr 2012: 31).

Already in 1997, Forbes and Sashidharan mentioned the complexities and contradictions of user involvement (Forbes/Sashidharan 1997). They observe a substitution of the concept of empowerment with the concept of user involvement and a danger of covering up the challenges and critical points of both concepts. The asymmetrical relationship between service providers and service users, for example, could be ignored (*ibid.*: 484). Further, the danger of user involvement linked to community care could concern the staff more than the users (*ibid.*). The awareness of these misunderstandings concerning the concept of user involvement provides a better understanding of the next two sections.

Despite this criticism, the concept of user involvement is widely used in the field of social work. However, there are different levels of intensity of the practice of user involvement. Usually, the role of service user is that of a consultant, for example during the research process and for the interpretation of the findings (Cossar/Neil 2015). There is hardly ever complete involvement in research work, although the service user should actually take control of the research (Beresford 2013). Furthermore, Beresford and Boxall (2012) demand a “collective involvement of service users” in education and research of social work (*ibid.*: 164-165). They argue that service users and service user organisations together have a stronger influence on promoting the understanding of user involvement. They can offer more direct information about studies made by service users themselves and about their own understanding. The manner of involvement depends on the understanding of the role of service users, which will be revealed in the next sub-chapter.

“Service User” and Service User Organisations

In the previous sub-chapter, it was seen that the theoretical paradigm shift of social work, known as critical or reflective social work, has had an influence on the practice of social work and the active role of the “service user”. Service users are defined as givers, not only as takers and as active participants, rather than passive recipients (Anghel/Ramon 2009: 187).

The term service user has had a tradition of 40 years in the service system in Britain (Beresford 2005). The term goes back to groups who use the term “to secure their rights and needs in relation to their use of health, social care and welfare policies and services” (ibid.: 469).

Further, the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission (2010) assigns service users an important active role, in contrast to viewing them as an “object” that needs treatment and social protection:

“A ‘paradigm shift’ in attitude and approach towards the role and position of service users in SSGI [Social Services of General Interest] can be identified. In this new attitude and approach, service users of SSGI have not been viewed as ‘objects’ of charity, medical treatment, caretaking and social protection. Rather they are considered and viewed as persons with rights who are able to (or should be supported to) claim those rights and make decisions in their lives based on free and informed consent as well as being active members of society. The new attitude and approach to service users is expressed in human rights conventions and declarations and has substantial consequences for quality concepts used in the provision of social services: the recognition of persons served in making choices and having control over their own life.” (Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission 2010: 5-6)

In the course of the re-evaluation of the active role of service users, other terms are used, such as patient, client and customer. They are seen as inappropriate since they have a more oppressive character in contrast to the term service user (Beresford/Carr 2012: 27). Admittedly, the term service user itself has implications and weaknesses (Beresford 2005: 471; McLaughlin 2009; Beresford/Carr 2012: 12-13; Beresford 2012: 27-29):

- It implies a passive attitude.
- It implies an economic understanding of social work.

- It focuses on an unspecified person and not on a relationship between a social worker and person in a specific social situation.
- It labels people and reduces their identity to the consumption of the public services.
- It reduces the complex identities that people may have and implies that all those people have something in common.
- It ignores that many service users are involuntary service users and compelled to use services.
- It has negative connotations of manipulating or “using” people.
- It includes people who do not want access to services.

Furthermore, some service users reject the term “service user” and instead prefer the term “consultant” (Anghel/Ramon 2009).

McLaughlin (2009) has also criticised other similar terms. He mentions that the alternative term “expert of experience” is not adequate. The reason is that the people cannot “differentiate between the nature and types of experience” within their own experiences (ibid.: 1113-1114).

It seems that there is no adequate term. Nevertheless, the term service user will be used in this book – with the awareness of its limitations and weaknesses – due to the fact that it is frequently used in national and international debates of social policies, social services and social work research. Furthermore, it has been used both by social systems and by service users together within their organisations. Perhaps, as suggested by Beresford (2005), the term service user “serves as a route to transforming or even ending the status of ‘service user’” (Beresford 2005: 475).

However, both McLaughlin (2009) and Beresford (2005) appeal to social workers to reflect on the appropriateness of the term. Language is not neutral. It conveys hidden meanings and concepts, which have an influence on social interactions in social work.

Similar discussions about language and the term service user are going on in the German-speaking context with the German term “Adressaten” (“addressees”) of social work (cf. Thiersch 2013). Pointing to the theoretical background, Thiersch presents a historical review starting with Rousseau’s concept that children are basically good, and continuing to the movement of democracy, justice and emancipation. Thiersch refers to human rights and explains that service users have the right to a life with dignity (Thiersch 2013: 20). He postulates that every citizen has to be empowered for participation in society and emphasises the following conditions (ibid.: 29):

Social workers have to be aware of the fact that they are influenced by the institutional framework. They have to clarify their point of view.

Both their work objectives and the institutional framework have to be determined precisely in team meetings and supervisions. In the course of these meetings, it is important to work out the biographical influence of every individual social worker.

It is important to trust and provide space for service users, so that they can express their concerns without any fear of consequences.

An institutional acknowledgement of the important role of service users is crucial. This implies that neither the form of participation of service users, nor their right to contact an ombudsman should have any negative consequences.

These conditions have to be guaranteed and promoted by social workers. In addition, it is important to be aware of the complexity and variety of the service users' involvement in social work.

In this context, service user organisations play a very important role, too. To our knowledge, there are hardly any service user organisations active in the field of social work in contrast to the field of psychology or psychiatry in Germany and Switzerland (cf. Chapter 3.6). The situation is quite different in English-speaking countries. In Britain, for instance, there is the very active and well-known service user organisation "Shaping Our Lives" (2015). It is an independent, national user-controlled organisation in the field of health and social care. They encourage and develop effective user involvement on a local and international level. They also provide a clear and comprehensive definition of the term service user:

- It means that we are in an unequal and oppressive relationship with the state and society.
- It is about entitlement to receive welfare services. This includes the past when we might have received them and the present. Some people still need to receive services but are no longer entitled to for many different reasons.
- It may mean having to use services for a long time which separate us from other people and which make people think we are inferior and that there is something wrong with us.
- Being a service user means that we can identify and recognise that we share a lot of experiences with a wide range of other people who use ser-

vices. This might include, for example, young people with experience of being looked after in care, people with learning difficulties, mental health service users, older people, people with physical or sensory impairments, people using palliative care services and people with drug and alcohol problems.
(Shaping Our Lives 2015: 1)

In this sense, McLaughlin (McLaughlin 2009: 1114) proposes to ask the service users themselves what they want to be called. This suggestion must be supported and, as a consequence, the following question arises: To what extent must service users not only participate in the debate of user involvement, but also take an active role in the debate? Beresford and Carr (2012: 33) point out new possibilities for service users to develop their own initiatives and campaigns via social media. There is, for instance, the influential “Spartacus Report” (Dhani/Winyard 2012) in Britain, which was researched, written and published by disabled people and other service users collaborating via social media. (Marsh 2014).

Empowerment

The concept of empowerment is used in different fields and is a discussion topic of controversy in both German and English-speaking countries. A systematic and reflected overview of this concept in the field of social work is presented by Askheim (2003) in English and by Herriger (2014) in German. The following outline of the concept of empowerment is based on both authors.

Two lines of tradition can be identified: One line of tradition is the political participation of all citizens and it is based on the self-help movement, where socially excluded people started to organise themselves. In the United States, they obtained more social and political power at the beginning of 1900 and later in Europe as well (cf. Herriger 2014: 21ff.) The other line of tradition is based on an action programme of professional social work. This line of tradition supports processes of self-organisation and empowerment by service users. It offers resources to implement this type of self-organisation (Herriger 2014: 19; Askheim 2003: 231f.). Here, the understanding of social work turns away from an insufficiently orientated perspective of the service user and points to human strengths instead of weaknesses (ibid.: 64-71). In

this context, Herriger has defined empowerment as “a process of development (...) in which people gain strength, which they need for living a better life based on their own standards.” (Herriger 2014: 13; own translation). In a similar way, Askheim formulates a “basic understanding” of empowerment because it is difficult to find an adequate definition: “The power should be given to or taken back by those disempowered.” (Askheim 2003: 230).

The main and common critical point of the empowerment concept (Herriger 2014: 80-85) is that the self-organisation of life is idealistic: It is problematic to empower people to assume more responsibility and to shape their own life when the conditions of social and political inequality and exclusion remain unchanged. Secondly, the empowerment concept is an excessive demand for independence: It has an understanding of a person without limits, who is stable, perfect and independent without weaknesses. Thirdly, a neo-liberal interest is hidden behind the empowerment concept, namely an instrumentalisation of the service user who is supposed to find paid employment as soon as possible.

Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish the practice of empowerment related to an individual, a collective, or on an institutional or community level (Herriger 2014: 86ff.). The focus on the individual level lies primarily on a psychological empowerment concerning a personal change, e.g. for developing mental and psychological competence. On a community or institutional level, it implies a structural change together with political empowerment, e.g. a street demonstration for a common political interest. Regarding the implementation of the concept of empowerment in the practice of social work, there are several challenges (Herriger 2014: 213ff.).

First, there is a challenge for the professional identity of the individual social worker. For example, there will be no standardised outcomes anymore and success has to be reformulated, because it is different for every user. Alternatively, a collegial understanding of social work has to be developed. Secondly, the relationship between social worker and user can be a challenge in the following situations: when the user refuses to receive empowerment, when the user’s wishes are unrealistic (e.g. financially), when there is a need for social protection and control. Thirdly, there are institutional challenges. Social workers have to take account of certain financial and economical boundaries set by their institutional mandate, which limits their perspectives and possibilities. It is also difficult to change a common and widely approved routine. In a similar way, Askheim defines systematically what the concept of empowerment demands from both service users and social workers. There

will be negative consequences if these challenges are not successfully resolved (Askheim 2003: 232-237). The implementation of empowerment concepts in the practice of social work can be appropriately “described as a balancing act on a slack rope” for the professional social worker and the service user who have to face these challenges (Askheim 2003: 237). Both Askheim and Herriger affirm that these challenges have to be accepted if a professional empowerment practice is to be applied.

Evaluation

It is very important for the development of projects and courses with user involvement in practice, research and education to be evaluated. However, in general, these evaluations are inadequate and not well known. Schön conducted a systematic analysis of articles in academic journals about user involvement (Schön 2016). She stresses the lack of knowledge about the effects of projects with service user involvement: “projects of user involvement in social work practice are often developed on an ad hoc and inconsistent basis, and knowledge about the effects of these efforts is still limited” (Schön 2016: 31). Further, she detected that service users and social workers describe projects with a gap-mending approach in a positive way. However, there is a “lack of evidence based knowledge” (ibid.). In order to eradicate this flaw, it is important to answer the following crucial questions (Schön 2016: 31):

- How should one proceed with these efforts?
- Which methods produce the most favourable outcomes?
- What does it mean to be in a user role? Is it a stigma or an improvement?
- How does this enhanced knowledge affect students’ work and attitudes once they become social workers?

Further, Schön summarizes three very useful categories for evaluating user involvement in social work, education and practice (Schön 2016: 31):

- outcome-focused research on methods and levels of user participation
- users’ perceptions of the quality of these activities
- the effect of these activities on a user’s quality of life.

There are several evaluations of user involvement in social work education that address the categories given by Schön:

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, service user involvement in education has been a mandatory requirement in Britain since 2003. At that time, a new British degree in social work was introduced at the Anglia Ruskin University. Service users and carers⁴ are consultants in the education of social work. This means that they are present in class, in the admission process of students or during assessments in social work. For the new implementation of this social work degree, an evidence-based evaluation (Anghel/Ramon 2009) was designed as a research project from 2003-2005. This long-term evaluation included service users, carers, members of the project advisory group (PAG), academic staff, students and internship instructors.

In a long-term study, Robinson and Webber (2013) also evaluated user involvement in social-work education. Students of social work and service users with intellectual impairments participated in this study.

Furthermore, there are some studies which analyse user involvement courses in social work education with a gap-mending approach, e.g. at the Lund University in Sweden, where the first courses started in 2005. Since then, 17 courses have taken place and all the courses were evaluated. The main results were published in an overview (Denvall et al. 2008; Kjellberg/French 2011).

Also, there is a published evaluation of a course at Lillehammer University College in Norway, which includes feedback from students (Askheim 2012).

It is not an easy task to find published evaluations of courses of social work with a gap-mending approach published in English or in other languages. However, this book presents several evaluations of courses within one volume, which include a majority of the mentioned categories of evaluation.

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4 In the UK, it is common that family members or friends provide unpaid support to related persons (cf. Chapter 3.3).

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