

# **New Theoretical Directions and concepts in social work**

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# The status of theory in social work

**Like other professions (medicine, psychology etc):** theory in social work helps to give practice a scientific grounding („professional accountability“)

**Unlike other professions:** the „subject matter“ of social work is highly complex, „treatment“ ranges from individuals to organisations (families, neighbourhoods, groups ...) to „society as a whole“ .

**Consequently:** social work appears to be an „in-between-discipline“ focused on complexity; knowledge is always embedded in specific historical, cultural and political contexts

Historical considerations:  
frequent paradigm shifts are inevitable

**Origins of social work:** „helping people to adjust better to the living and working conditions under capitalist industrialisation“ – yes, but people have a (justified) resistance against „adjustment“, human needs do not automatically correspond to work conditions.

**Early scientific-methodological responses** to address „resistance“ against being helped and turn helping into a self-development, pedagogical process:

**psychoanalytic concepts**

**social pedagogy and community education**

„enable people to find their own solutions“

The „**universal model of social work**“ after World War 2 in the „Western World“

**Casework, group work, community work** as standard scientific models, in the forms of

- psycho-social casework,
- behavioural social work,
- systemic social work or
- solution-focused social work

All were supposed to be „**scientifically neutral**“, as against the ideological bias in racist (Nazi-) or communist versions of „social assistance“

# Critique of the „universal model of social work“: new paradigms must recognise the **importance of diversity and identity**

**Casework, group work, community work** as standard scientific models, in the forms of psycho-social casework, behavioural social work, systemic social work or solution-focused social work was supposed to be „**scientifically neutral**“, as against the ideological bias in racist (Nazi-) or communist versions of „social assistance“ –

**BUT**

Feminists and black activists criticise the assumed neutrality as „*colour blindness*“: it does not take account of identity aspects; creates exclusion rather than inclusion by „categorising cases“

„radical social work“ builds on Marxist critique of capitalist modes of production

# Neo-liberal backlash against normative social theories:

1990s: Social policy in most countries (including post-communist countries) changed towards individual responsibility and “activation” of social service users: “personalisation” of intervention on the basis of “what works best”:

Intervention should chose the **“evidence based approach” (EBP)** according to empirical studies that show the most effective strategy for each “problem category”

**HOWEVER:** what counts as “evidence”? How to reconcile benefits for individuals with benefits for groups or for society overall?

# Paradigm shift: post-modernism

**Post-modern criticism of „scientific certainty“:** the underlying power interests of every epistemology needs to be exposed and „de-constructed“; theories are merely „narratives“ that cannot claim to express „absolute truth“

**Social work reception:** ambivalent – resonates with social workers' caution regarding the „power of experts“, but can lead to relativism and „anything goes“ mentality;

**Social workers are being criticised for having „made the wrong decision“ (particularly in child protection cases with fatal consequences)**

# Paradigm shift: **service user participation**

Growth of „**service user movements**“ since the 1980s: mental health patients, disability movement, „survivor groups“, gay and black rights movements: „*nothing about us without us*“ (People First).

Methods and research need to „give voice“ to people who have been silenced (also by experts!)

Experts are just one source of knowledge – personal experience counts also

Shifts in knowledge creation also in medicine:

taking up **Paracelsus** (1493 – 1541) “*patients are the true doctors, doctors are merely their helpers*”.



# Post-modernism and user participation converge on a **critique of objectivity**

Scientific methods need to respect the dignity of the person – operating with notions of objectivity carries the risk of turning persons into objects.

Subjectivity gains in importance also in the natural sciences: **quantum mechanics** stress the influence of the observer standpoint on observations – there is no „true reality“, only different „ways of being“  
= **challenge to positivism** –

**BUT:** can „facts“ be ignored in social work without making decisions arbitrary?

# Latest paradigm shift: **post-anthropocene;** **post-humanism, post-materialism**

**Bruno Latour** in "Agency at the time of the **Anthropocene**": *"To be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy"*.

Nature teaches us this lesson drastically through the unrelenting advance of **global warming** that we have no ultimate control over it.

**Critique of humanism**: it is just another form of dominating other cultures and nature with "absolute (Western) viewpoints"

**Answer**: To refrain from distinguishing between object and subject, nature and culture, feeling and thinking and work with integrated perspectives that let knowledge emerge in such a way, that gives voice to the repressed spheres of reality, above all nature itself which clearly sets limits to our ambitions to control it.

# Current crisis signs – „end of paradigmatic explanations“: **polarisations and confusion**

- **Environmental crisis** – does rational argument change people's behaviour?
- **Corona crisis** - should we restrict the freedom of citizens more in order to secure a better general health status?
- **Ukraine war** - Should we respond to military aggression with equal military means? And what is the war about?

In all these crisis situations, returning to “established positions” seems impossible, divisions and polarisations deepen, helplessness and confusion spread

# Social work and knowledge production can help – **shift in the manner in which we search for paradigms**

concerns in social work circle constantly around the search for **what constitutes the social dimension of our existence**

**What is “social” cannot be grasped through definitions, but is constantly “a work in progress”** (“social distancing” in Corona restrictions made us aware of this);

*Social integration does not happen spontaneously as some naïve idealists or some dangerous nationalists propose, but neither can it be “engineered”. It forms in the myriads of interactions in which we connect with each other, helpfully or unhelpfully, in our moving towards each other and in our being repulsed by each other.*

In tracing and interacting intricately with these processes, as social workers do, existing knowledge is used and new knowledge is being constantly created.

Important is the critical reflection in this process, **what kind of society does it create?**

# The old and future social work paradigm:

The central social work competence has always been the ability to listen attentively and reflectively to these interactive processes

The current state of global helplessness makes us aware that a paradigm shift consists not in the formulation of new ideologies, but in freeing ourselves from ideologies and getting down to sustaining our social connectedness, with each other just as with the natural environment, in full recognition of our differences, our inadequacies but also our hopes.

This is what “best practice” in social work demonstrates, this is what our teaching, research and practice need to focus on in future.