

At Least Seven Possibilities – Systemic Social Work in Germany

Johannes Herwig-Lempp, Hochschule Merseburg

Abstract

"There are at least seven possibilities" – for how one sees, describes or explains something, but also for how to act. The Merseburger approach to systemic social work is autonomy-based, i.e. it puts the focus on the individuals' desire and right to decide for themselves what is good for them. A vision of humanity emerges on the basis of a number of theoretical assumptions that allows social workers to see their clients as capable and as equals. The concrete methods and their implementation in social work practice are derived in turn. Since systemic concepts are primarily applied in the contexts of therapy and counseling in Germany, it is important, among other things for our professional self-perception, to accentuate the difference between social work on the one hand and counseling and therapy on the other. An appendix extends to view beyond the approach as it is taught in Merseburg.

"Es gibt immer mindestens sieben Möglichkeiten" – etwas zu sehen, zu beschreiben und zu erklären, aber auch zu handeln. Der Merseburger Ansatz der systemischen Sozialarbeit ist autonomie-basiert, d.h. er stellt den Wunsch und das Recht von Menschen, selbst bestimmen zu können, was gut für sie ist, in den Mittelpunkt. Vor dem Hintergrund einer Reihe theoretischer Annahmen entsteht ein Menschenbild, das den SozialarbeiterInnen ermöglicht, ihre KlientInnen als vollwertig und ebenbürtig zu sehen. Daraus lassen sich Methoden und konkrete Umsetzungen für die Praxis der Sozialen Arbeit ableiten. Da in Deutschland systemische Konzepte hauptsächlich im therapeutischen und beraterischen Kontext vermittelt werden, ist es u.a. für das professionelle Selbstbewusstsein wichtig, den Unterschied zwischen Sozialer Arbeit einerseits und Beratung und Therapie andererseits hervorzuheben. – Ein Appendix weitet den Blick über Merseburg hinaus.

Introduction

"Systemic social work" is still not yet widespread in Germany. To date, systemic approaches are used above all in therapy and counseling. Whether a form of "systemic social work" exists or should exist outside of the framework of therapy and counseling is debated.

In the 1970s and 1980s, US-American and Italian books and a growing number of German-language publications, growing numbers of conferences, workshops and trainings led to the spread of systemic / family therapy concepts and methods. The access to training for the different professions was uncomplicated, the freshness and unusual nature of its contents and its practicality probably contributed significantly to the spread of family therapy and later of systemic approaches in social work. Today, "knowledge of systemic counseling" often is mentioned as requirement in vacancy announcements for social workers - even if it is at times unclear, what exactly this means.

The systemic field is a large market in Germany, a variety of large and small institutes have emerged offering a wide variety of training and qualification modules in systemic counseling and therapy.

The two major systemic therapy umbrella organisations - the DGSF and the SG⁴ - have each developed (similar) certification systems that are based primarily on formal criteria (scope, qualification of teaching staff). The fact that these modules usually take place under the title "therapy/counseling" (and not at all on "social work") is, on the other hand, a discreet form of discrimination, i.e. discrimination by the omission of the unique aspects of social work⁵.

Theories – Attitudes – Methods: The Merseburg concept of systemic social work

For me, the systemic-constructivist approach is a tool⁶ that consists of theories, attitudes/world view and methods. The basis can be seen as "the systemic perspective", i.e. a set of theoretical axioms (suppositions), assumptions about "human nature" as well as criteria for a methodical approach that relate to the specificities of professional social work. These suppositions are presented as axioms, free of any claims to their „truth“ or completeness. The axioms are not justified; the only important thing is of and where they can be effectively applied.

A) Theoretical suppositions

- The environment that we perceive is our invention. (Heinz von Foerster)
- Objectivity is the delusion of a subject. (Heinz von Foerster/ Ernst von Glasersfeld)
- Everything said is said by someone. (Maturana/Varela)

These three assumptions form a constructivist foundation: reality is not directly accessible to us, we must interpret reality (using our body and our mind). The fact of this this subjectivity, the reduction of our point of view alone to our own person, is our blind spot.

Once we understand reality as something that is constructed, we can then try to deconstruct it and then reconstruct it in a new way: we are responsible for how we perceive to be reality (or what we consider it to be) and how we shape it.

- Problems are a matter of opinion.
- It could be different.
- There are always at least seven possibilities.

Under these conditions and from this perspective, problems no longer „exist“. Instead, they are descriptions, ideas and concepts developed by people and adapted by them. When two people say "we have a problem", this can be "liquefied" without difficulty: neither do they have the same problem

⁴ The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Therapie, Beratung und Familientherapie (German Association for Systemic Therapy, Counselling and Family Therapy,; DGSF) with over 4000 members (of which an estimated quarter to a third are social workers!) and the Systemische Gesellschaft (Systemic Association – SG), which was founded originally by various training institutions. Several years ago a Deutsche Gesellschaft für systemische Soziale Arbeit (German Association for Systemic Social Work – DGSSA) was founded by university professors, but it has yet to grow beyond ca. 100 members.

⁵ This is also true for other professions that could be dealt with more sensitively in the systemic field.

⁶ Considering I understand theories and approaches as tools (cf. Herwig-Lempp 2009), it stands to reason that I find it less than productive to look for "real" tools or to insist on "definitive, standardized" instruments.

nor do these problems always remain the same. It is worth it to ask, when and in what situations who exactly „has“ a problem with what – and when this is different.

Every description, every explanation, every perspective is contingent, i.e. it could be different. Thus I can always develop further perspectives, explanations and descriptions – and in doing so develop new possibilities for action. Only when I assume that I can describe, explain and experience something differently will I begin to look for possible alternatives.

- Everything flows. Change is a constant.
- We can only move ahead, we can't move back.
- Small changes lead to further changes.

The supposition that change is a constant is both a helpful and necessary prerequisite for starting an attempt to change something. If change already takes place constantly, the attempt influence this change makes senses.

From a systemic point of view, relapses are impossible; any apparent relapse or even stagnation can just as easily be perceived as forward movement. Experience makes it impossible to return to some previous point of departure.

An old systemic model is that of the mobile: everything is related to everything. If it is possible to trigger movement at one point, this will also have an impact at other points (sometimes it is just a question of whether we are able to focus our attention on these other points to observe these changes).

B) Suppositions on attitudes/the human condition

A central issue is the image of humanity: how do we perceive the people with whom we work, both clients and colleagues. One might say, summarily, that they are just as I perceive myself. They are no different from me. This assumption can be especially helpful when I have developed a completely different impression based on my experience and my feelings, when I am of the opinion, I cannot understand someone else. Just then it may be helpful to regard them as being just like me.

- All people are autonomous and “eigensinnig” (make their own sense of the world).
- People always do what they want.
- Mixed feelings (ambivalencies) are normal.
- Everyone has a good reason for doing what he/she does.

In Western society, the individual is of primal importance: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." (Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The right to self-determination (to be "free"), is just as much an unconditional right as is dignity, reason and conscience. This cannot be denied anyone. Everyone wants to determine for themselves and does so – with the limits of their available and identifiable possibilities. All human beings are thus „eigensinnig“,

i.e. they have their own head and their own will, they determine how they look at the world and how they interpret it, how they attribute intrinsic meaning to situations/ their perceptions).

Consequently, people are, from a systemic point of view, are in a position to "always do what they want" (cf. Efran et al. 1989, p 10). They always chose that option from those available to them that they regard as the best – after weighing the pros and cons (and sometimes they see, as mentioned, far fewer options than they actually have).

From their own individual perspective, they thus gave „good reasons“ for what they do, for the choices they have made. Their actions make sense in their personal context, they are "reasonable", even when outsiders see this differently and understand their actions or decisions completely differently. This assumption allows me to work with people whose behaviour is incomprehensible to me and appears (according to my standards) unreasonable.

- Instructive interaction is not possible. (Maturana/Varela)

People are no machines, they live, are „eigensinnig“, autonomous, independent. In this respect we believe that every individual is different – and that no techniques exist that we could use to make them "function"; people cannot be "programmed" or controlled reliably.

- All people want to cooperate all the time.
- All human beings are equal with respect to these assumptions.

These two assumptions convince me, especially with difficult clients, to be especially persistent and patient looking for signs of their willingness to cooperate and their "normality" – and then to reveal them. How many of these basic assumptions, they can be especially helpful when they appear most unlikely or even absurd.

The less obvious and appropriate all these suppositions appear at first glance, the more useful and meaningful their application is: the more unchangeable a situation or a person appears to me, the more important it is that change is assumed; the more helpless a person appears to me, the more helpful it is (for me and for them), if they are assumed to be autonomous and “eigensinnig”.

The absolute nature of these statements ("all", "always", "is") does not imply their truth. Instead, it expresses their status as suppositions, as definitions that may (but must not) be applied without exception. And, of course, the underline the challenges that they represent for me.

The theories, attitudes and practices of the systemic approach are particularly suitable for social work. They can contribute to (re)establishing the capability to act (influence potential, "power"), both of the social worker as well as their clients. In the everyday work of a social worker, reality appears in many situations to be especially "hard" and immutable, change all too often appears impossible, people appear driven (from inside and out), controlled and helpless. Social workers deal with very complex situations and get involved in different ways, even and especially when they act against the wishes of their clients, when they negotiate and facilitate, when they obtain goods or even when they are simply "there." In these cases a systemic approach can be a useful tool - with its theoretical suppositions and its methodical options.

C) Methodical and practical focus: My systemic view

These assumptions may be understood as theoretical elements, but they might also be interpreted as guidelines for their practical implementation. In Merseburg I also use to represent what I understand to "systemic social work", a "systemic view".

To work "systemically" for me means among other things that I cannot forget that there exist perspectives other than my own present, trusted or even imaginable perspectives. To that extent, the systemic approach can also be understood as a point of view (as one of many possible points of view) that one can apply in social work. If I want to look "systemically", then I can, for example, look at the following:

My systemic view is directed towards

- Resources, strengths, abilities and achievements
- Contexts
- Different perspectives
- Mandates
- Exceptions, solutions, the future
- The multiplication of options
- Autonomy and own ideas
- Willingness to cooperate
- Feelings, moods, atmosphere and humour
- Appreciation

Various methodological options emerge from this perspective.

Resources: I can, for example, look specifically to identify and focus on a person's resources. What can they do well? What else might they do well? What do they like about their child (with whom they are having so much trouble at the moment)? What are the advantages hidden in their current problem or their difficult situation?

Contexts: I can ask about the specific circumstances in which a particular problem or specific form of behaviour occurs. I can create a genogram or a VIP-card and thereby get an overview of context in which individuals interact.

Different perspectives: I can ask, who sees something a specific way? And who has a different perspective / view / opinion? What others might there be? I can work with sculptures, small or large role-playing scenarios to illustrate different points of view.

Mandates: I can explore the mandates; ("How can I help?" "Who has what expectations and demands from me – clients, colleagues, superiors"?) take them up, refuse them, negotiate or ignore them - and definitely reflect on them.

Exceptions, solutions, the future: I look for and elucidate exceptions to a problem ("When is there no problem?" "When does someone deal well with it?") and find solutions ("What could be a solution – and what else?"). I can focus on the future ("What are possible solutions?") instead of the past ("What exactly was the problem?").

The multiplication of options: I can try to develop several (not just one) plans of action or solutions ("There are at least seven ways: let us look for and find us.")

Autonomy and own ideas: I can ask people what their ideas they have for solving a problem – and what path they would choose (instead of suggesting or prescribe them). I can always ask "What is important to you? How can we take that into consideration?"

Willingness to cooperate: I can – especially when someone does not want to work with me – think about how I might identify signs of cooperation. I can ask under what conditions the other might feel the need for a minimum of cooperation. I can reveal my own conditions and under what conditions these might be negotiable.

Feelings, moods, atmosphere and humour: I can discuss feelings, ask about them and respond to them. I can develop an understanding for them (even if I do not share them) and I can work with humour: when we laugh at something, we show that it can be viewed from different perspectives, and thus we reveal our mental agility.

Appreciation: I can strive for appreciation – even and especially when I find it difficult. Finding occasions for compliments changes my perspective, my focus, the direction of my own searching – and also my attitude to my counterpart, even before this appreciation takes its effect on them.

Quite apart from the fact that all of these aspects are already a form of appreciation for my counterpart – which is in itself a condition for further cooperation.

Current Developments in Germany

So far, I have presented my own concept and my own approach. They are not alone. From my perspective, the strength of the systemic concept is that it permits variety even on its theoretical and practical levels and permits a variety of options.

Differences in the various approaches are founded in claims to a closed theoretical construction or references to systems theoretical, development psychological, family dynamic or constructivist concepts and the degree to which claim is made to have developed an approach specific to the profession. In the appendix I have listed some German representatives of systemic social work and a short selection of their publications as well as a short summary of their perspective on systemic social work.

The discussion on systemic social work is relatively marginal within the systemic field in Germany. The major associations see no need to elaborate on professional social work from a systemic point of view. The German Association for Systemic Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für systemische Soziale Arbeit - DGSSA) remains small and has not made any significant waves. It has organised several

smaller conferences in various regions in Germany in recent years. It publishes an online magazine (dgssa_journal) and is in the process of developing a certification for systemic social work. (While no other journal that specialises in systemic social work exists, at least three of the major systemic journals in Germany accept contributions on social work and by social workers: KONTEXT, systema, Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung).

Despite the demand for knowledge of systemic (counseling and therapy) in the field of social work, universities and Universities for Applied Sciences (the convenient schools where social workers get their professional training in Germany) are reluctant to offer systemic seminars or programmes, limiting themselves to either seminars on system theory or inviting teaching therapists from private institutions to give workshops. In Merseburg I myself offer three 4-day-long seminars (spread over different semesters) on systemic social work that mainly introduce students to methodical tools and practise their implementation. For several years now I have begun to reserve several places in these seminars for practitioners who are interested in systemic training and pay a fee to the university. The teaching process profits significantly from their practical perspective and thus, all three sides (students, practitioners and teacher) profit from this combination.

The first German master's programme for systemic social work was established in Merseburg and ran from 2009 to 2011. The modules include, among others, theory, methods, practical implementation, research and evaluation, instruction, leadership and social economics. It also included an English language course, an excursion abroad and a final paper or workshop at a conference⁷. Demand for the programme is there, so it will be offered again in 2013-2015. Other universities in Germany apparently see no need or do not have the capacity to develop such a programme.

Since 2004 an irregular series of conferences on systemic social work have been held at various universities in Germany with 50 to 250 participants, who saw themselves as part of a specific tradition, most recently the 3rd and 4th Merseburg Conference about Systemic Social Work "2 x 2 = grün - Die Vielfalt der systemischen Sozialarbeit"⁸ in July 2011 and (bilingual) "Acht' auf den Abstand! – Möglichkeitsräume in der Sozialarbeit // Mind the Gap! – Potential Space in Systemic Social Work" in October 2012. Whether this series will be continued is also an open question.

The unique aspects of social work

While probably more than a quarter of trained systemicists are social workers both by profession and in their day-to-day work, few if any explicit concepts of systemic thought and practice for the specificities of this profession exist.

The most important systemic authors and trainers consider themselves therapists and counselors and have studied psychology and medicine - or they are social workers, who have "jumped ship" and now no longer consider themselves social workers but "(teaching) therapists", "supervisors" or, at the least, "counselors" and describe themselves as such. The focus is on therapy and counseling and the

⁷ For more information see www.sysoma.de

⁸ 2 x 2 = Green - The Diversity of Systemic Social Work

qualifications that one receives is implicitly understood as such. Insofar as social work is discussed at all, it is understood as identical to counseling.

What tends to be disregarded, is that social work is much richer, more varied and (if you will) is more demanding than simple counseling and therapy⁹.

- The work between a social worker and client includes, in addition to simple counseling, a whole range of other kinds of activities (cf. Lüssi 2001, p. 392ff). These include negotiation with clients and other agencies and frequently facilitation between various institutions and parties, obtaining a means of living (i.e. money, housing, employment, contacts, access) for clients; often they control, intervene, regulate, for example, access to help and thus at times clearly act against the wishes of their clients. Social workers act and make decisions on behalf of clients and, finally, they are often "simply there", receptive, waiting, apparently doing nothing at all - and yet it is an essential part of their work (and can include "professional waiting" "professional coffee drinking" and "professional football playing").¹⁰
- Social workers most often work in the context of very complex situations and expectations. In a single "case" (better: practice situation, client, assignment, mandate) many people are often involved or need to be involved, all in consideration of various mandates, laws, terms and conditions. Social workers work at the interface between people, professions and interests, they mediate and negotiate between them. They carry great responsibility, every day they make a variety of large and small, not always conscious decisions that may have a substantial impact on their clients and on their work with them.
- Social workers have to deal with a variety of settings in which they are far from a defined space for consultations; from in home visits or group home visits, from street work to an appointment at the doctor, a diner with the residential group to a visit in a discotheque, from accompanying a client to a lawyer to participating at a trial, from a day pass with a convict to a hospital visit - all this and much more is understood as a matter of course in social work (and is often enough not reflected upon critically in teaching).
- Social workers often work within organisations, in teams and networks. Therefore they must not only consider the interests of their clients, their employers and the cost bearers but also the institutions, colleagues and partners involved. They often work together in teams and are connected to regional networks.

These specific aspects of social work are usually not addressed in systemic training modules because the trainers (teaching therapists) are not aware of them or consider them irrelevant. Beside the focus on therapy and counseling the specific situation of and demands on social workers are often

⁹ cf also a recent discussion following an article „Social Work is More Demanding than Therapy” by Johannes Herwig-Lempp and Ludger Kühling (2012)

¹⁰ This "simply being there" is a common practice in social work (in Germany). It is nevertheless hardly reflected upon theoretically and is not taught.

overlooked and thus neglected. The inability of trainers to take into consideration the overall context of social work remains a barrier to the development of systemic social work as its own concept.

This fact has consequences not the least of which is the (self-)understanding of the work of the participant social workers and practitioners of other professions who may come to the conclusion that it is only possible to work (systemically) in counseling and therapy situations. And it stands in the way of an appreciation for the fact that it could be interesting and rewarding to work systemically as a social worker.

It is for this reason that, in my mind, it is necessary - at least for a certain period of time - to develop a specific approach to systemic social work, to do justice to the professional specificities of social work and to strengthen the professional identity of social workers. Not all actors in the field of systemic social work see it this way.

Appendix

Some well-known contributors to systemic social work in Germany¹¹

- Wolf Ritscher, psychologist, retired Professor at the Hochschule Esslingen, one of the first scholars of systemic social work, proponent of a psychoanalytical development-oriented approach (Ritscher 2002, 2007)
- Ulrich Pfeifer-Schaupp, professor for Social Work at the Hochschule Freiburg, authored two books on systemic social work 10 and 15 years ago (Pfeifer-Schaupp 1995, 2002)
- Ludger Kühling, philosopher and social worker, trainer, supervisor – occasional publications, co-developer of the master's program in Merseburg (Kühling 2004, Herwig-Lempp & Kühling 2012)
- Heiko Kleve, Social worker with practical experience as a case worker, Professor at the Hochschule Potsdam, active proponent of a constructivist approach, draws among others on Luhmann and his systems theory, interested in professional questions, authored many books (Kleve 2000, 2007)
- Wilfried Hosemann, pedagogue and co-founder of the systemic movement in Germany (DAF), Chairman of the DGSSA (Hosemann & Geiling 2005)
- Johannes Herwig-Lempp, social worker, Professor for systemic social work/ science of social work and founder of the first German master's programme for systemic social work (Herwig-Lempp 2012, 1994)
- Jürgen Hargens, psychologist, one of the first systemic practitioners to receive wider recognition in Germany, founder and editor of the Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und

¹¹ Note: Also Austrian (e.g. Milowiz) and Swiss scholars (e.g. Vögtli, Geiser, Lüssi) publish in the German language, are read and have an influence on the German scene, even if they are not mentioned here explicitly.

Beratung [Journal for Systemic Therapy and Councelling], open to new forms of (social) work (Hargens 1993, 2000)

Systemic German Web Pages

A selection of web pages on systemic social work and the systemic field in Germany:

- German Association for Systemic Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Soziale Arbeit - DGSSA): www.dgssa.org
- German Association for Systemic Therapy, Counseling and Family Therapy, (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Therapie und Familientherapie - DGSF): www.dgsf.org
- Master's program for Systemic Social Work (sysoma), www.sysoma.de [Author: J. Herwig-Lempp]
- Systemic social work, www.systemische-sozialarbeit.de [Author: J. Herwig-Lempp]
- Systemic Society (Systemische Gesellschaft - SG), www.systemische-gesellschaft.de

German Journals

- Kontext, <http://www.v-r.de/de/zeitschriften/500049/>
- Familiendynamik (<http://www.familiendynamik.de/>)
- systemmagazin – online-Zeitschrift (www.systemmagazin.de)
- systema (<http://www.if-weinheim.de/systema.html>)
- Systeme (<http://www.oeas.at/systeme/>)
- Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung (<http://www.verlag-modernes-lernen.de/docs/systemische.php>)

References

Hargens, Jürgen (1993), KundIn, KundigE, KundschafterIn. Gedanken zur Grundlegung eines "helfenden" Zugangs [Client, expert, scout. Thoughts on the development of a "helping" approach]; in: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie, Vol. 11 Nr.1, pp. 14-20;

Hargens, Jürgen (ed.) (2000); Gastgeber hilfreicher Gespräche. Wir haben Ihnen geholfen!? Was haben wir von Ihnen gelernt? Systemische Ansätze in der sozialpädagogischen Familienhilfe [Host for helpful conversations. We have helped you!? What can we learn from you? Systemic approaches in socio-paedagogical family support]; Dortmund: Borgmann

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes & Ludger Kühling (2012), Sozialarbeit ist anspruchsvoller als Therapie [social work is more demanding than therapy], in: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung, 2/2012, S. 50-56

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (2012), Ressourcenorientierte Teamarbeit. Ein Lern- und Übungsbuch, [Resource oriented teamwork. A text and work book] 2nd edition ; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (2009), Theorien sind Werkzeuge [Theories are tools], in: Bernd Birgmeier & Eric Mührel (Hrsg.) (2009), Die Sozialarbeitswissenschaft und ihre Theorie(n). Positionen, Kontroversen, Perspektiven, Wiesbaden (Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften), S. 185-197

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (2000), Aus Erfolgen lernen: Ein Instrument der Selbstevaluation. Sechs Argumente und ein Leitfaden zum Sprechen über Erfolge [Let's talk about success! Guidelines and 6 arguments why to talk about successful experiences], in: Systema 2/2000, Jg. 14, S. 185-195 [english version as pdf:

<http://www.herwig-lempp.de/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/0202successJHL.pdf>]

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (1996), Drug Addiction, The Systemic Approach, and the Concept of „Acceptance“, in: Journal of Systemic Therapies Vol. 15, 2/1996, S. 24-35 und S. 67-68 (as pdf)

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (1994), Von der Sucht zur Selbstbestimmung. Drogenkonsumenten als Subjekte [From addiction to self-determination. Drug users as subjects]; Dortmund: verlag modernes lernen

Hosemann, Wilfried & Wolfgang Geiling (2005), Einführung in die systemische Soziale Arbeit [Introduction to systemic social work]; Freiburg; Lambertus;

Kleve, Heiko (2007); Postmoderne Sozialarbeit. Ein systemtheoretisch-konstruktivistischer Beitrag zur Sozialarbeitswissenschaft [Post-modern social work. A system-theoretical constructivist contribution to the science of social work]; (orig. 1999); Wiesbaden: VS - Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften;

Kleve, Heiko (2000), Die Sozialarbeit ohne Eigenschaften. Fragmente einer postmodernen Professions- und Wissenschaftstheorie Sozialer Arbeit [Social work without a face. Fragments of a post-modern professional and scientific theory of social work]; Freiburg: Lambertus

Kühling, Ludger; 2004; Was könnten wir tun, um die Bedeutung der Systemischen Sozialarbeit möglichst gering zu halten? [What can we do to make systemic social work as meaningless as possible?]; in: KONTEXT, 4/2004, Vol. 36, pp. 374-380

Pfeifer-Schaupp, Hans-Ulrich (Hrsg.), Systemische Praxis. Modelle – Konzepte – Perspektiven.[Systemic Practice. Models – Concepts – Perspectives] ,Freiburg 2002 (Lambertus)

Pfeifer-Schaupp, Hans-Ulrich, Jenseits der Familientherapie. Systemische Konzepte in der sozialen Arbeit [Beyond family therapy. Systemic concepts in social work], Freiburg 1995 (Lambertus)

Ritscher, Wolf (2002), Systemische Modelle für Sozialarbeit und Therapie. Ein integratives Lehrbuch für Theorie und Praxis; Heidelberg [Systemic models for social work and therapy. An integrative textbook for theory and practice]; Carl-Auer Verlag

Ritscher, Wolf (2007), Soziale Arbeit: systemisch. Ein Konzept und seine Anwendung [Social work: systemic. A concept and its application]; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht



Walter Milowiz, Michaela Judy (ed.)

STEP

Systemic Social Work Throughout Europe

Insights



The project „STEP“ has been funded with support from the European Commission.

This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The copyright for the articles belongs to the authors.

Find more informations about this project and a download-version of this handbook on the STEP-website:

www.asys.ac.at/step/

Contents

STEP - Systemic Social Work Throughout Europe.....	5
<i>Walter Milowiz & Michaela Judy</i>	
The Principle of Feedback Loops: Forgotten Roots of Systemic Thinking?	8
<i>Walter Milowiz</i>	
Developments in the Systemic Ideas of Social Work and Family Therapy.....	18
<i>Katarina Fagrerström & Synnöve Karvinen-Niinikoski</i>	
At Least Seven Possibilities – Systemic Social Work in Germany.....	30
<i>Johannes Herwig-Lempp</i>	
Systemic Solution-Oriented Social Work in Switzerland.....	41
<i>Käthi Vögtli & Irene Müller</i>	
An Investigation into the Systemic Approach.....	56
<i>Bernhard Lehr</i>	
Hackney - Systemic Approaches to Social Work Practice.....	65
<i>Robert Koglek & Sarah Wright</i>	
Systemic Social Work- a Glimpse from Inside Scotland	72
<i>Anke Maas-Lowit & Mike Maas-Lowit</i>	
Introducing Systemic Social Work beyond Europe: How Social Work benefits from the Systemic Perspective.....	80
<i>Lisa Werkmeister Rozas</i>	

STEP - Systemic Social Work Throughout Europe

A Handbook for Practitioners about Steps We Took, Work We Did and Insights We Gained

In October 2010 seven teams from seven institutions in five European countries working in the field of social work on a systemic basis met in Vienna: teachers, practitioners and researchers. What they had in common was a name for their working field and their theoretical approach: social work on a systemic basis.

They decided to start a discussion about the theory and how it could be applied in social work. For this aim they applied for an EU-Leonardo-da-Vinci-Partnership project and met another six times in each of their countries, held lectures, showed each other social projects, discussed with more practitioners, students and teachers.

It was not an easy endeavour: In the beginning we could nearly only see differences, as every partner put his/her emphasis on the way he/she worked. But the systemic approach is a big tree with many roots and many branches.

By and by we learned to follow down the branches and up the trunk and in the end - after lots of patience and hard work we could see that there are basic commons and the differences are different possibilities of application. You will find some more about the importance of different possibilities in Johannes Herwig-Lempp's Article „At Least Seven Possibilities - Systemic Social Work in Germany“.

The commons are:

- Whatever happens is always part of the interactions of a bigger system - from family up to politics
- Complex feedback-loops define stability of systems - no matter whether they are fine or bad
- Humans as autopoietic systems produce their own reality
- It is not possible to look into humans nor to control their behaviour
- Most of the unfavourable but stable systems build up on the difficulty that people with different views of the world fail to understand each other.
- Every change in one point of a system causes further changes in the bigger system.

One reason for our seemingly disagreements and misunderstandings in the beginning was, that every one of us spoke about his/her work and his/her ideas concerning his/her work and not about the basics: About the branches and not about the roots.

After we realized the common roots we could see the different ways people work as different ways to actualize the fundamental systemic paradigm in the main aim of social work. Social work is concerned with people living under conditions not complying with the standards of the society or are in danger of not doing so in the future. Its business is to help such people to stabilize their lives.

Each article of this book illustrates one or more of the basic principles of the systemic approach and shows exemplarily typical ways of actualizing them in the working field of social work.

They also illustrate the way every institution - as an example for their respective countries - has taken in developing practise from the basic ideas.

When you read this book you will first find the theory of feedback loops and their relevance in the article of Walter Milowiz: "The principle of feedback loops: Forgotten roots of systemic thinking?", also a few examples of how to use this idea as an instrument for diagnosis and intervention in problematic situations.

Synnoeve Karvinen-Niirikoski's and Katarina Fagerström's paper „ Developments in the systemic ideas of social work and family therapy in Finland" gives an overview at the epistemological history of the concept "systemic" in a social work and family therapy context and links it to contemporary social work in Finland. Finally it presents some examples of practices that can be considered as systemic social work, the challenges of which they identify as calling reflexive and flexible practitioners conscious of their own agency and expertise affecting their attitudes, services and interventions they provide. They also describe methods of training for practitioners.

Johannes Herwig-Lempp shows in his article "At Least Seven Possibilities - Systemic Social Work in Germany" how the systemic approach was received and developed in Germany.

Based on the constructivist paradigm the Merseburg concept focusses on change i.e. that change is a constant, that we can only move ahead, not back, and that small changes lead to further changes. His image of human personality consequently refers to "Eigensinn" (autonomy, self-will) and to a systemic view that focusses on resources, contexts and mandates, perspectives, autonomy and appreciation.

Käthi Vöggtli and Irene Müller describe in "Systemic Solution-Oriented Social Work in Switzerland" the development of teaching solution focussed Social Work at FH Luzern according to the development of solution focussed and systemic approaches. They are grounded in the conviction that clients are experts on their own life, on dialogue and on the expertise of not-knowing. Examples of a systemic approach in practice round off the article.

Bernhard Lehr (FH Campus Wien) builds his article on considerations about the idea of insight. He joins the principles of feedback-loops, 2nd order cybernetics and constructivism and shows a method for training and supervising, which he deduces from those.

The article from London is an example for the application of the systemic approach to the wider system: „Hackney - systemic approaches to social work practice" by Robert Koglek and Sarah Wright describes the introduction and development of systemic approaches to social work practice within a statutory Children's Social Care department in the London Borough of Hackney. The Hackney Model of social work brings together social workers and clinical practitioners from a range of disciplines and backgrounds to work collectively and collaboratively with families, introducing multiple perspectives and providing professional support to each other in managing high risk situations. The main aim - to enable more children to live safely within their families - can be achieved by that.

The contribution from Aberdeen, too, shows the connections between the situation of the individual, its surrounding and the social system: Anke Maas-Lowit and Michael Maas-Lowit discuss in their article „Systemic social work- a glimpse from inside Scotland" systemic social work within the scotish social system for people who have committed serious criminal offences and who also experience mental illness. It outlines the systemic relationship between both social worker and the offender and wider systems of law.

And last but not least one of the Merseburg participants fortunately is also a teacher for social work in Connecticut, USA thus introducing a wider international perspective. In her article "Introducing Systemic Social Work beyond Europe: How Social Work benefits from the Systemic Perspective" Lisa Werkmeister Rozas focusses on the applicability of systemic approaches to social work, especially on how the U.S. education of social workers could benefit: „One aspect of Systemic social work which makes it very well suited for social work is that it is taught with a focus on applicability. Theory and practice are woven together in a manner that makes the methods very accessible, practical, and easy to utilize and understand.”