Hille Richers:

Panel: Empowerment, Community Organizing & Soziale Arbeit

Fachforum Empowerment in der Sozialen Arbeit,

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Thank you very much for the invitation to this important conference.

I wish to address two big questions in my presentation:

First: Why should students of social work learn about Community Organizing . And what should they learn?

Second: What are the special challenges in combining social work and organizing?

I will first discuss 4 challenges of critical importance to social work in Germany today. Based on this, I will list 7 principles for a practice of social work which uses the concept of community organizing.

I belong to this group of socialworkers that invited community organizers from the United States to Germany in 1993 to train German social workers. Later, we traveled to Chicago and in 1995 founded the "Forum Community Organizing ", called FOCO. We did this because we wanted to become more competent in activating and organizing underprivileged, poor people. The primary focus on case-oriented social work in Germany is certainly rooted in the contracts and job descriptions. But I believe, it is just as much a matter of a missing vision, and a lack of specialized skills. These factors limit social workers to deal with the upcoming challenges in our society and their impact on those people we are working with. How can we do our job in a more proactive, strategic way and with greater political awareness?

 I see 4 main challenges around poverty, social marginalization and discrimination that we are facing in Germany. Where we as social workers are called upon to find appropriate answers:

First, poverty, social marginalization and discrimination are never only a personal problem, but they are rooted in the material life-circumstances, the opportunities for political participation and missing experiences of self-efficacy ("Selbstwirksamkeit") in the many different fields in the lives of poor people. Here is where social workers need to be more clear in their thinking and acting!

Second, the deepening disparities and gaps in our society are a consequence of political decisions. The interests and topics of poor people, unemployed and Hartz IV recipients are highly underrepresented in all political negotiation processes. Their self-organizing structures and alliances are weak. More people's power is urgently needed!Third, it is well known in politics, that the missing participation of many people is a big problem for our society. Therefore, we find diverse programs in Germany at the national, state and local level for better participation of citizens. Also social workers are involved here ("Quartiersmanager"in "Soziale Stadt-Programmen"). How can we use the offer of participation in a clever way, so that the issues of the poor and underrepresented really finds their way into policy making? The danger here is that legitimate leaders of the poor get worn out by the time-consuming processes that are designed in the logic of public administration. They risk losing the connection with their communities, thus becoming frustrated and powerless. Social workers need more critical power analysis in this field!

Fourth, social work needs to define its role in relation to the worldwide efforts for climate justice, poverty reduction and transformative change as summarized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We know that our present model of growth and wealth creation has no future. The search for sustainable modes of production and living will lead to intensified distributional conflicts between organized interest groups. I see only few social workers- mostly in the field of refugee empowerment work- who see the bigger picture and understand the need to build up powerful alliances of civil society groups.

After outlining the 4 challenges confronting social work today, I now turn to the professional attitude, skills and methods needed for social work using community organizing.

My impression is, that it is only a minority in our field who see the place of social workers clearly on the side of poor, underprivileged and discriminated people. Who have a deep rooted understanding of power relations and strong feelings about injustices in our society. Who are motivated by the vision of an inclusive, caring society built on people's- power! These are the values and professional ethics you need for a start.

What else? I **see 7 basic principles** that should guide the training and practice of social work in this field:

1. Stay close to the people!: Practice an activating, resource-oriented listening and building of personal relationships of trust and respect, so called "public-personal relationships" to very different people ("professionelle Nähe"). It is very important to build up these relationships especially to people, who do not participate, who live in "difficult" neighborhoods, people who are called to be "difficult" by officials in politics or the administration (Sozialamt, Jugendamt) It is necessary to understand their experiences, their visions, their anger; to have relationships to their leaders and strengthen them so that they can articulate themselves in public. What an impact, if a migrant woman speaks up, critisizes the plans of local authorities and makes suggestions on behalf of her community organization

2. Build organizations! Bring people together so that they can find out issues of mutual interest in their community and help them to define their own agenda, not just reacting to the agenda that the public administration might be offering. You need professional skills to transform a problem into an "issue"! In a listening process with local residents in Saarbrücken they heard, that the city had decided to tear down an important footbridge. They managed to build up so much organized power, that a decision was made to invest 1 Mio. Euro for a new pedestrian bridge. Or take the example of this town where people developed their own model of a neighborhood assembly (Stadtteilvertretung) which often disagrees with public officials and holds them accountable. Despite such conflicts, public authorities in both cities are very much aware, how important it is to have organized people who care for these "difficult" neighborhoods. I know of several cities where they maintain contracts for doing this sort of GWA or "bottom up community organizing".

3. Do power analysis ! To do research with people about their situation starts with a power analysis. This new view on the situation, shows background information, alliances, diverse interests and helps

to develop own ideas, options, conclusions and strategies and it helps to understand how politics work. Who are the responsible people in the administration for our issue? Who could we address to build up new alliances? This is where practical democratic education takes place! I remember p.e. a hearing at the German Bundestag that was organized by a coalition against child poverty in a rural area. Based on previous research, they managed to meet with key representatives from all parties responsible for this issue and could confront them with their agenda. This experience gave them good new energy for their further effective struggle on the local level.

4. Connect small steps with a wider vision : It is essential to develop tactics and strategies with the people (and not for them): The practical steps have to be connected to the experiences of the people and they must be ready to act. I have to admit, that I only know of few examples, where it was possible to connect local issues with regional or nationwide campaigns. In the example above on child poverty, the social worker was afraid to become "too political" and that "her" people would feel like loosing control over "their" issues. Connecting to larger context is a great challenge. But it can work, when the organizers have good personal connections to regional/national campaigns and can relate to different cultures and social environments: I heard about neighborhood work in Kreuzberg that links to the city-wide "affordable-rent-coalition (Mietenbündnis). And this approach works in Munich with Hester Butterfield, an impressive organizer and social worker.

5. Be creative and have fun! In organizing you learn how to develop creative actions, that make fun and attract people. It is important that the work in and for the community is rewarding and fulfilling for the residents. I remember a neighborhood, where, after checking that the rent increase was invalid - they put up a shredder in the street, invited all the tenants and the media and had a great party destroying the invalid rent increase letters!

6. Seek to clarify your role: As social workers using community organizing methods we will be mainly occupied with listening and building up neighborhood organizations. But to really develop power to act, you will need to act together with other organizations. This is really different to "networking" and joining "round tables". A colleague, who was involved with GWA for many years described to me her key experience, that really changed her role into organizing: That happened, when she faced the challenge to build up an organization. Here she was clearly in the "second row", more of a consultant rather than a manager or powerful self-appointed intermediary. This is possible, when you are clear about your concept and role. And it may show, that it is necessary to find additional funding or rewrite job descriptions.

7. Organize the funding ! Whose money do you use? In organizing you learn how important it is to have an independent funding source for your work. I know, that is really, really difficult! I do not want to deepen the argument here, whether it is better to be funded by big corporations (BMW/Quandt, REWE or Generali) or by the public sector.
- Community organizations that want to act independently need their own money: membership dues by individuals and/or member organizations. This needs to be the fundament!
- It is always better to have a funding of mixed sources than only a single one.
- Those who negotiate the funding need to have a clear understanding of the underlying concept. It helps to have NGOs as employer (and not the government). But only if they are

not afraid of conflicts and open to modify a social worker's job description as needed in the community.

- And it is important to be connected to CO-networks for reflection, training and consulting - this is true for the professionals as well as the volunteers.

Conclusion:

Even if the situation today is much different to the Alinsky times, in Chicago's „Back of the Yards" of the 1930s. His guiding principle is still higly relevant: It is about struggles over resources, it's about power and conflict! As participation is a human right, it is very important today, that the socially deprived, disadvantaged people, people without power, get the chance to identify their self-interests, to develop people's power and are able to put their issues on the political agenda - on a local, federal and even international level… Alinsky is right: Power is the ability to act!

It all has to start close to the people in the neighborhoods, but it should not end there. Real changes will only take place if there are bigger alliances of different organizations, locally and nationwide at best. I hope we will have more good examples of cooperation , also between neighborhood organizing and "Bürgerplattformen". Both approaches are important. We social workers are the specialists, that have the knowledge and the relationships to mostly unorganized people in deprived neighborhoods and we can build bridges, spread knowledge between those different worlds of organizations, cultures and movements.

I agree with Rob Fishers: "Let the people decide". It is an art to handle this properly. It helps us to realize: We as socialworkers do not have much power (even if we think we have, because we have such good relationships to important people in town hall….). The _real_ power is with "organized people's power", with their anger, their experiences and a good portion of "Huzpe".

I see it as our primary task as social workers, to listen, to stay in the back seat and to organize to strengthen this people's power. We need to act with great serenity and deep humanistic understanding so that this people's power will not be misused by populist and inhumane agitators. I hope you agree: Community organizing needs to be part of neigborhood social work and, therefore it must be included in the curricula of social work education! Trainings with the Forum for Community Organizing make this happen !

Further Information:

- Forum Community Organizing e.V. : www.fo-co.info

- Handbuch Community Organizing , Stiftung Mitarbeit :
  https://www.mitarbeit.de/publikationen/shop/handbuch_community_organizing/
- Hille Richers (www.hille-richers.de)