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Symposium
The implications of media representations
of social work and social workers

Social Work and its Medial Representation

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Social work in the public

- How is social work presented in the general public?
- I have been engaged with this question for years and decades and approached the subject in a series and studies
- My central concern is: how social work is represented in the media and how does the public perceive social work? Which themes are of public concern? How are these specific topics represented? Are they:
 - informative
 - objective
 - blaming the clients
 - blaming social work
 - scandalizing or empathetic etc.

Two perspectives

First: The public perspective on social work

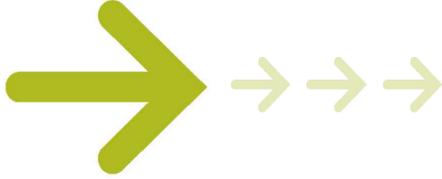


How is social work represented in the media and how does the public perceive social work?

Second: How social work presents itself publically?



= The way social work deals with the public: by management, by foundation/ legitimizations, by goal setting in social work discourse (or social work public relations)



Brief overview about my most important studies

- a) The representation of social work in popular German magazines (2002)
- b) How are social workers prepared for communication with the public? – Results of the research study „Public relations in the teaching at the departments of social work“ (2004)
- c) The representation of topics from the social work sector in British Newspapers (Guardian, Independent, Daily Mirror) (2007)
- d) The representation of social work in daily German newspapers and television with the background of the self-conception of the profession of social work (2014)

The representation of social work in German popular magazines

Why?

- The magazine market may serve as a platform for the formation as well as the exchange of opinions (Habermas)
- Furthermore, the magazine market might be a tool to not only discuss social problems (in terms of social work's daily practice) but also to offer accounts and solutions according to occurring social problems (Burkart)

Why:

It is to be examined, whether the topics are being **scandalized** (from the client's perspective as well as from the viewpoint of the concerned public)?

Are they **neutral** (in terms of an objective representation of the specific problems)

Are they **informative** and **supporting**?

Do the themes refer to processes of finger-pointing and the **attribution of guilt** (the client of social work is individually responsible and guilty for her or his own situation)?

Theoretical basis: Theorie der Öffentlichkeit and agenda setting theories

- Günter Bentele; Manfred Rühl (Hrsg.)(1995): Theorien öffentlicher Kommunikation. München.
- **Jürgen Habermas (1962/1990): Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Frankfurt.**
- **Jürgen Habermas (1995): Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns. Frankfurt.**
- Niklas Luhmann (1996): Die Realität der Massenmedien. Opladen.
- Friedhelm Neidhardt (1994): Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen. Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie ((Agenda setting -Theorien)). Köln.
- Richard Münch (1991): Dialektik der Kommunikationsgesellschaft. Frankfurt.

Methodology

Examination of 4 popular weekly magazines (general focus on magazines, but different reader groups)

- I. STERN: the biggest magazine with a focus on social politics and (social) documentations
- II. SPIEGEL: the most high-circulation magazine with the strongest focus on politics, economies and culture
- III. BUNTE: the biggest magazine focusing on social life and life style (stars, royals, beauty, fashion, sight seeing)
- IV. BRAVO: leading children and teenager's magazine

Common: no resort of “social matters”

Methodology

Observation period: 01/01/2000-04/15/2001;
concerning 67 issues of each weekly magazine;

The examination was made on the basis of a qualitative oriented media analysis (Mayring, 2000), whose results allow the formulation of trends and characteristics

Performed by using the analysis of digitized data (by MAXQDA)

Key words: social work, social pedagogies, youth welfare services, family counselling and family welfare, poverty

Der STERN

Originally, the STERN focused on social-liberal matters. Today, its emphasis is rather moderate

The STERN ist famous for its stress on social problems and inequity

The question is: does it report about topics of social work?



Der STERN – some findings

Mentioning the key terms „social work“ and „social pedagogies“ in 67 different editions only six times.

Only three entries with genuine social work content: two times child protection („lawyer of the child“) and building a hospice for children.

Beyond the key terms sw and sp: a smaller part of genuine social work topics (but without mentioning the terms sw or sp!) as

- sexual abuse

And a bigger part of topics concerning social work in a wider sense as

- anorexia (girls)

- drugs

- poverty

- right-wing violence by young people: mostly documentations

Der STERN - results

Lots of social (work) topics

Articles: informative and critical

Positions are mainly formulated from the social work perspective (but without mentioning it).

This perspective is viable and suitable for everyday life with a lot of helpful advice, links and addresses.

Some reports are scandalizing and may/should benefit the clients (not the government).

Articles are person-centered: reconstructing a single case from the client's or social worker's (empathetic) perspective; the case is then „generalized“. So, the reports represent facts and analytical interpretations which go beyond the certain (single) case.

Topics are researched solidly and refer to founded background knowledge.

Der SPIEGEL

Besides the „big“ topics

- Economic problems
- Europe
- Foreigners with their problems – often refugees by politics or poverty reasons

The Spiegel focuses on

- Poverty
- Family issues
- Spoiled children
- Teenagers at risk (as the current title shows)



Der SPIEGEL - some findings

- Even cover stories deal with social (work) topics such as the deficient nutrition of children.
- It can be seen that certain social pedagogical topics are pointed out from time to time.
- The frequency scale of social work content is as follows:
 - Welfare of child
 - Right-wing violence
 - Family politics, family law, family life form
 - Migration, foreigner law

Der SPIEGEL: social work themes – frequency scale

Welfare of child

Right-wing violence

Family politic, family law family life form

Migration Foreigner law

Anorexia Sexual abuse

Young offenders, Juvenile deviance, drugs, handicaped people,

Der SPIEGEL: welfare of the child - examples

- The most dominating thematic complex concerns children – from a general pedagogical approach: that they do not experience adequate limits
- Themes are directly related to social work matters: such as children living on the street. 10000 children escape their parents homes (and foster or residential care); the tenor is: that the search for freedom often results in drug abuse, crime and prostitution.
- Under the headline „Foreseeable Harm“ a report referred to neglect which resulted in death. Dominic’s mother let his two year old son starve. The magazine titled: „Dominic got more attention after his death than he did in his entire short life“. The judiciary investigated against two social workers due to involuntary manslaughter (killing caused due to gross negligence).
- Further reports indirectly hint at social work not being sufficiently well equipped. However, the assumption that succesful social work projects are not mentioned or even perceived as such cannot be proven. The succes is rather linked to achievements of active and committed private actors.

Der SPIEGEL - results

- In contrast to the STERN, the reports in the SPIEGEL are more abstract
- Furthermore, they are not related to single actors or cases
- Reports are task-oriented
- The SPIEGEL does not work on topics from the social work sector *as explicit* as the STERN does
- The perspective on issues of social work rather tends to be superordinate, such as from the field of sociology, law or political science
- The focus lies on addressing framing circumstances. And – for that reason – on the critical and sometimes even scandalizing exposure of public support systems to which social work belongs

Die BUNTE

The BUNTE focuses on issues of life style and the (high) society. The magazine had not been expected to stress social work issues.

However, from the perspective of researchers it is interesting to analyze how this kind of magazines addresses social matters.



Findings in the BUNTE

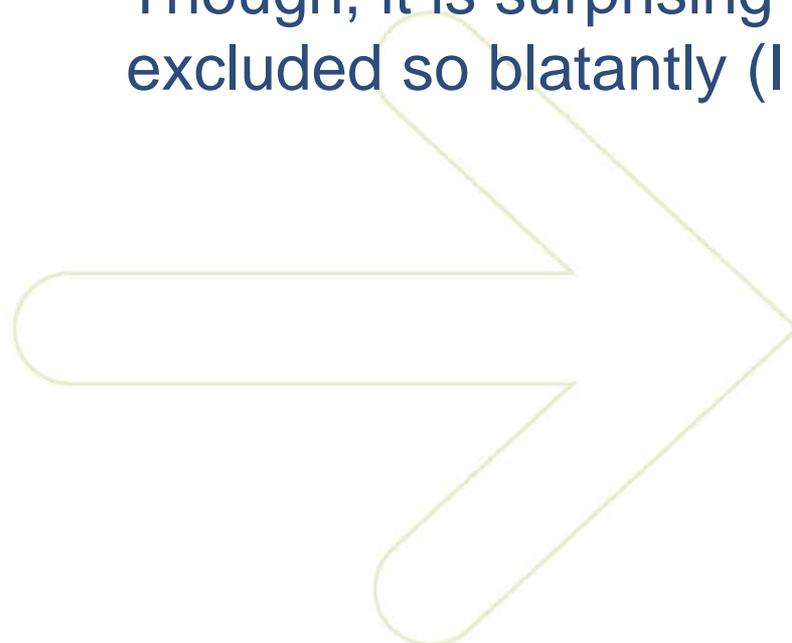
None.

(Not a single one.)



Die BUNTE - results

- During the entire period of investigations, it was found that the representation of social work matters was not considered relevant.
- Though, it is surprising that these topics have been excluded so blatantly (I suppose: by an editorial statute).



Die BRAVO

Market leader for the 12-15 year old readers.

Its main focus lies on typical teenager interests, such as music, film and sports.

In addition to that two other categories

- first: counselling to questions about the body, sexuality and other teenager specific problems. The editorial team acts as a counselling team. It thus responds to letters to the editor.
- second: documentations that clearly focus on social (work) issues.



BRAVO - some findings

Pages provide information about sexual education, health education and some practical life support from the perspective of teenage readers.

Problems as:

„I have stolen grandpa’s money!“ (Sven, 13),

„How dangerous is smoking weed?“ (Manuela, 14),

„Does my friend want to commit suicide?“ (Carina, 17)

„Panic, I am homosexual!“ (Marco, 15)

- Serious (and professional) answers will be given to the questions - from the perspective of social work.

Some documentations clearly focus on social work issues which refer to illness, disability, poverty of teenagers, former Neo-Nazis and attempted suicides.

Sensitive analysis and helpful hints with contact addresses can be found, especially in contributions about missed children, anorexia and sexual abuse.

BRAVO - results

From a journalistic point of view: similarities between BRAVO and the STERN. Differences are due to the different target groups. In terms of the categories *counselling* and *documentation* it is the BRAVO's aim to offer advice and assistance to personal life matters and problems of teenagers.

The original assumption about the BRAVO was that articles are rather written on a unsophisticated level and thus mainly deal with sex and the commerce of the world of adolescence. After the examination this assumption must be partly revised: The categories *advice* and *documentation* often deal with social work topics.

The articles are easy to read, which might be due to the young age of the target group, the content is nevertheless seriously edited.

BRAVO does cooperate with social work professionals (result: expert interview)

Conclusion and discussion

Are social work issues present in German magazines – and if so, how are they being discussed?

The first part of the question can be approved unconditionally: in three of the four examined magazines, social work topics are debated.

The second part of the question is more difficult. It refers to the aspect how topics can be represented in an adequate way from the perspective of social work. – Each magazine that has been dealt with deeper has an own identical style and understanding. This explains why the reports vary strongly.

However: in Germany social work succeeded to enter the medial platforms.

Conclusion and discussion

In spite of the wide-spread themes of social work in the public sector there is a striking observation to be made:

The presence of social work topics rather refers to social work themes than to the accordant profession of social work.

Social work topics are not discussed by experts of social work practice (not even discipline or science). Rather, judiciaries, politicians, medical scientists or psychologists respond to social work issues. Sometimes social workers are interviewed as experts. **However, these experts are then assigned to other professions or being denominated as „addiction experts“, „drug experts“, „family counsellors“ etc. – not with social workers...!**

Further considerations from a perspective of communication studies

Social work topics are indeed present in German magazines. But social work topics seem not to be considered to belong to the profession of social work.

This may be due to that fact that social work institutions or actors do not deliver sufficiently relevant information to public relations agencies or editorial departments (Puhl, 2004). This distinguishes social work from experiences media makes with other organisations, such as churches and businesses.

Critical remarks

It strikes the eye, that social problems are being discussed on a benign, understanding and even sophisticated level.

In German magazines neither the clients nor the social workers are being blamed personally.

Articles in German magazines outline, if any, the shortcomings of the German welfare system.

However, this is in no way in line with the image that is ascribed to social work in representative studies (sw is often considered as incompetent, unsuccessful and expensive).

It should therefore be analyzed, why the positive images, which are connoted in German magazines and the ones, which are expressed by the general public - or even some of the social workers on the quiet – diverge so widely?

Thank you for your attention!

