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On Multifaceted Commonality: Theories of Social Pedagogy in Germany

Philipp Sandermann ^{1,*}, Sascha Neumann ²

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*Correspondence: sandermann@uni-trier.de

¹ University of Trier, Germany

² University of Fribourg, Switzerland



On Multifaceted Commonality: Theories of Social Pedagogy in Germany

Philipp Sandermann & Sascha Neumann*,
University of Trier & University of Fribourg

THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

This paper makes an attempt to interpret the German debate on social pedagogy as a multifaceted perspective that, whilst diverse in its assumptions about what social pedagogy is, also shows a striking commonality. To exemplify this, we intentionally focus on dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany, which aim to directly answer the question of what social pedagogy is. However, in attempting to contribute to a clearer understanding of social pedagogy as a theoretical phenomenon, it is not sufficient to describe these theories and the various ideas of social pedagogy they generate. Instead, it is essential to deconstruct how these theories reify their numerous assumptions on social pedagogy. We will therefore argue that it is worthwhile not to focus too narrowly on what is reified as social pedagogy in dominant theories in Germany. Instead, we suggest a careful analysis of how social pedagogy is commonly theorized. Our hypothesis is that, in Germany, prominent theories of social pedagogy reify social pedagogy by means of a distinctively ontological mode of reification. This mode we see as a common pattern of dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany, regardless of the different objects of social pedagogy produced by these theories. Beyond a mere critique, we intend to also explain this mode at the end of our paper and raise the question whether it might point to a broader concept of how theories of social pedagogy and social work are usually generated in Germany and beyond.

Key words: Theory; Social Pedagogy; Germany; Ontology; Reification

Introduction

There have been broad discussions on theories of social work and social pedagogy in Germany for more than 120 years now (Lambers, 2013). These discussions were connected to attempts to establish an academic discipline in Germany's higher education. Around 1970, these attempts were finally successful, with courses established at regular German universities as well as at Germany's so-called universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*). The label 'social work' was mostly used for courses taught at Germany's universities of applied sciences. The traditional universities (*Universitäten*) mostly used the theoretical label 'social pedagogy' for their degree programmes,

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drawing on a tradition of thought that was rooted in some of the philosophical approaches of the late 19th and early 20th century. These had had attempted to react to the social issues and upheavals of the 19th century by means of a pedagogical approach and with reference to educational understandings (see Sünker and Braches-Chyrek, 2009; for a more detailed overview see Dollinger, 2006; with a broader focus on educational sciences see Veith, 2007).

Regardless of institutional success, Germany's academic discourse around social pedagogy and social work has, over the decades, been somewhat defensive. To a certain degree, this might have resulted from the work of German academics coming from general education/pedagogy, who have regularly commented on the academic state of social pedagogy and social work studies, which they have typified as an academic sub-discipline (Lenzen, 1994; Ehrenspeck, 1998), if any. This kind of understanding was nurtured by the fact that at most German universities social pedagogy could only be established as a major degree within the pedagogic or educational sciences. In line with this structure, the idea of social pedagogy as a sub-discipline has been reproduced even in research literature (Thaler, 2013). From an outside perspective it is furthermore remarkable that not only academic competitors from other (sub-)disciplines, but particularly those academics who are social pedagogy scholars themselves, and therefore the very people who succeeded in establishing social pedagogy as an academic discipline, have obviously continued to doubt whether a full academization of social pedagogy can actually prevail (Niemeyer, 2003; Dewe and Otto, 2011).

Alongside these doubts not so much a political, but also a distinctively theoretical debate on what social pedagogy is has been established. This debate is strongly related to an overall discussion of what the presumable 'core identity' of social pedagogy in practice might be (Thiersch and Treptow, 2011).

Meanwhile, the international Anglophone debate has also started to reflect more broadly on social pedagogy (Kornbeck and Rosendahl Jensen, 2009; Kornbeck and Rosendahl Jensen, 2011; Schugurensky and Silver, 2013; Stephens, 2013). This reflection has not strictly been limited to a reception¹ of the German debate but very much focused on its previous results when considering the question of how social pedagogy can be defined as a special approach to both understand social work practice (Gustavson, Hermanson and Hämäläinen, 2003; Hämäläinen, 2003) and to enhance it (Smith and Whyte, 2008; Petrie and Cameron, 2009; Petrie et al., 2009; Coussée et al., 2010; Hämäläinen, 2012).

As we aim to show below, it might be risky though for the international debate to rely too much on the previous outcomes of the debate in Germany. We argue that it is necessary to scrutinize this debate very carefully in order to dissect what the theoretical concept of social pedagogy in Germany might be about. Once deconstructed, the debate on theories of social pedagogy in Germany can still be of decent use for understanding not only what social pedagogy is, but maybe even for explaining a broader concept of social work theory.

Our argument uses four steps to answer our basic question: 'How do theories of social pedagogy in Germany work, to what extent do they actually vary in the ways they work, and why do they work the way they work?' In part 1, we briefly sketch out how earlier debates on theories of social pedagogy identify the fact that various theories of social pedagogy end up with different ideas of what social pedagogy 'is' as an epistemological problem. We will make the point that this fact is not an epistemological problem but a contingent and normative one, if any, produced by earlier meta-perspectives on social pedagogy in Germany. We therefore outline an alternative meta-perspective

¹ As far as theories of social pedagogy from Germany go, it indeed seems adequate to speak of an international reception and not so much of an internationalisation, as – interestingly enough – contemporary German authors did not significantly contribute to the international debate on social pedagogy in the beginning and are just about to keep up with the development (Walther, 2014: 90).

on German social pedagogic theories. This meta-perspective examines the variety of what existing theories 'reify'² as social pedagogy (see part 2 of our argument), and also focuses on what all of these theories seem to have in common: they all reify their ideas of social pedagogy in a comparable manner (see step 3 of our argument). Fourthly, we conclude that this commonality reveals how social pedagogy construes what it describes in the act of description. In other words: Social pedagogy can be understood as a distinctive mode of reification that aims to *describe* a field of interest in a distinctive way. As we will show, this way has proved to be both functional and dysfunctional at the same time. At the end of our article, we raise the question whether what we have tried to demonstrate here might also be valid for a broader analysis of the international debate on social work theory.

1. Do various ideas of social pedagogy represent an analytical problem?

It has often been mentioned that German approaches of 'social pedagogy' reflect a somewhat undefined concept, which attempts to connect several historically changing notions in one word (Wilhelm, 1961; Mollenhauer, 1966; Erikson and Markström, 2000; Hämäläinen, 2012). Not only in a historical perspective, but also in the current state of German debate on social pedagogy, this judgment is seemingly compelling. At least this is the case as long as one describes social pedagogy as something that has to be defined as a unique matter. Presupposing this, the theoretical debate on social pedagogy in Germany is disappointing as there is a whole variety of approaches here which try to define in relatively different ways what social pedagogy is or should be, and each of these approaches uses rather dissimilar auxiliary tools to do so. The approaches vary a lot in terms of what they detect as the main object of social pedagogy on the one hand, and in terms of what they see as a core identity of social pedagogy 'in practice' on the other hand.

Therefore, the debate has often been summarised as a hopeless adventure trying to find out about the 'real' identity of social pedagogy (Rauschenbach, 1991: 1). This is also because, in the German-speaking debate, the term 'social pedagogy' still characterises at least three things:

- ✦ An academic discipline under the roof of pedagogy/educational sciences,
- ✦ A conglomeration of theoretical perspectives on fields and practices of education, which particularly emphasize their social and societal conditions,
- ✦ A collective term for a rather disparate professional field, which Germans traditionally identify as *Kinder- und Jugendhilfe* (child and youth welfare).

Thus, the term social pedagogy appears to represent a rather blurry terminology, and at the same time a very indistinct idea of one or even more professional fields. Furthermore, it has done all of that in a historically somewhat inconsistent way. Against this background, it seems hardly surprising that the German debate on social pedagogy can feel rather discouraging for those who are actively involved in it and that the question of social pedagogy's 'identity' has survived amongst analysts until today (Füssenhäuser and Thiersch, 2005; Lorenz, 2008; Dewe and Otto, 2011; Füssenhäuser and Thiersch, 2011; Thiersch and Treptow, 2011).

What makes things even more confusing is that meanwhile the debate in Germany no longer distinguishes consistently between the two terms 'social pedagogy' and 'social work' (Kessl, 2013: 25). Therefore, we would like to conclude two things at this point. First, it would obviously not be worth staying too close to the term 'social pedagogy' alone in attempting to learn more about how it

² By using the expression 'reification', we stress the constructivist idea that there 'are' no epistemological 'matters' apart from their description. In other words, we assume that every way of describing a 'matter of fact' is at the same time a way of generating it (Krohn and Küppers, 1990).

is generally understood. Second, even a comparative approach focusing on commonalities and differences between various theories of social pedagogy and social work in Germany would fail if it were only to compare the multiple results of reifications that these theories generate.

In what follows though, we do not take these circumstances as normatively problematic matters. Therefore, it is not our goal either to answer the questions arising from them through any counter-argument about which of the existing theoretical reifications of social pedagogy is 'correct'. Instead, we will take the current theories of social pedagogy in Germany as our basic research material. In other words, we take the position that in order to understand what 'social pedagogy' in Germany 'is', it is worthwhile to accept the variety of reifications of social pedagogy generated by German theories of social pedagogy as an empirical phenomenon. As such, this variety might represent inconsistencies and diversities of theoretical assumptions about social pedagogy but does not present an epistemological problem hindering an academic observer of social pedagogy from drawing conclusions on social pedagogy in Germany. To show both the variety and the common outlines of the debate on what social pedagogy is in Germany, it is important to describe both what existing theories of social pedagogy reify as social pedagogy (see 2), and how they do it (see 3).

2. The variety of social pedagogies within contemporary German theories of social pedagogy

In what follows we would first like to demonstrate the variety of *what* theories of social pedagogy in Germany have generated as social pedagogy. To do so, we will refer briefly to four approaches that are currently rather dominant and have been continuously quoted with regard to the state of recent theory building in German social pedagogy (Füssenhäuser and Thiersch, 2005; Füssenhäuser, 2011b; Rauschenbach and Züchner, 2011). What they all have in common is mainly the ambition to generate a theory, which intends to describe, analyse and explain 'social pedagogy' as a whole. This ambition is regularly marked in a twofold manner: On the one hand, they explicitly describe themselves as 'theory'; on the other hand, they claim to give a valid representation of social pedagogy as something specific and distinct (like, for example, to be distinguished from education in school or in the family). In this sense, they differ basically from the variety of other approaches also lively in the theoretical discourse related to social work issues, such as approaches of welfare state theories, theories of socialization, psychoanalysis, labelling approach and social system theory (see Payne, 2005). Whilst these approaches also contribute to the understanding of social pedagogy and social work practice in Germany, they are not directly and substantially trying to describe what social pedagogy is. We therefore did not include them in our selection of approaches to be discussed below.³

A first example of such a distinct theory is Michael Winkler's 'theory of social pedagogy' (Winkler, 1988; 1995; 2003). Unlike many other approaches within the German debate, Winkler's approach clearly specifies what issues a theory of social pedagogy has to decide on before embarking (Winkler, 1988: 12). Above all, he explains, it has to decide on the level of investigation. Winkler's theory itself states that social pedagogy is a reality that qualifies as such only through a specific discursive reflection (Winkler, 1988: 33; 1995: 108). This assumption has consequences for the way in which social pedagogy can be described, because it no longer anticipates social pedagogy as a static matter of fact but as an unsteady, contingent process, which has to be observed in a

³ There are more examples that could have been discussed here – for instance several German theories of social work which draw from sociological systems theory (Hünersdorf, 2009; Scherr, 1999). These examples are not principally excluded by our selection and have already been discussed in earlier publications (Neumann, 2008; Neumann and Sandermann, 2007).

different way. To achieve this, Winkler introduces the concept of 'discourse' as his main category for observing social pedagogy. Referring to post-ontological thoughts such as those of Wittgenstein and Foucault, Winkler describes the discourse of social pedagogy as finally and precisely what is 'real' for its participants (Winkler, 1988: 31). Therefore, Winkler argues, he can firstly draw a theory of social pedagogy from this very discourse (Winkler, 2003: 11) and secondly use the discourse to outline the general idea of a theory of social pedagogy, i.e. an 'epistemological dispositive' of social pedagogy (Winkler, 1988: 19). So, what we can learn from Winkler's approach is that, above all, social pedagogy is supposed to be a pedagogical discourse, which delivers both an object and a specific way of reification at the same time.

As a second example, we refer to perhaps the most dominant theory of social pedagogy in contemporary Germany: the approach of *lifeworld orientation*. It has mainly been developed by Hans Thiersch (see Schugurensky, 2014) and his school of thought since the late 1970s and was initially called *everyday orientation*, referring to Karel Kosík's (1976) thoughts on the dialectics of everyday life. Contrary to Winkler's approach, the theory of a lifeworld oriented social pedagogy has not been developed systematically, but as a cumulative concept that has been renewed several times. Nonetheless, lifeworld orientation does not intend to offer a purely theoretical approach for analysing and describing social pedagogy and social work. It also claims to generate ideas for better social work practice (Thiersch, 2002: 128), like many other approaches do (see, for instance, our third and fourth example below). At the core of the lifeworld orientation approach, there is the assumption that social pedagogy is above all a practice of deep understanding of its clients' subjective views and everyday life routines. The latter is relevant in two ways. First, the approach's idea is that social pedagogy professionally identifies the individual life and coping strategies of its clients to understand their functionality as well as to distinguish between strategies that are more or less 'working' for the clients. Second, it aims to describe how the process of understanding itself opens up ways for social pedagogy to shape all relevant dimensions of the client's everyday life: 'time, social environment and social relations [in order to] support everyday coping patterns in the struggle for a successful everyday' (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009: 131).

The theory of *social work as service* (Otto and Schaarschuch, 1999) provides a third example of a rather influential theory of social pedagogy in the current German-speaking debate. Similar to the approach of lifeworld orientation, it has been developed and changed over decades by a whole school of scholars around Hans-Uwe Otto, a second prominent and influential figure in German academic social pedagogy standing next to Hans Thiersch. It basically describes social pedagogy as a 'professional mode of action in the public sector of social service provision' (Otto and Schaarschuch, 1999: 38). Focusing on general definitions of service provision in modern societies and those societal conditions that are specific to the field of social work, it aims to describe social pedagogy as a specific type of service provision that does not produce, but co-produces services that are primarily driven by the service's clients. The normative core of this approach is obvious as it marks out critically the degree to which it has not (yet) been set into practice. The authors have marketed their approach as an advancement of lifeworld orientation (see, e.g., Flösser and Otto, 1996). By embedding the approach in the historical development of theories of social pedagogy in Germany, the approach claims to represent an up-to-date description of the field it is aimed at. So, the approach outlines social pedagogy as a 'dialectical relationship of professional and service user represented in the conceptualization of social work as service' (Otto and Schaarschuch, 2009: 38).

Fourthly, we can refer to an approach that expressly declares to include findings from sociology of knowledge in its concept of social pedagogy. Introduced into the German debate by Hans-Uwe Otto as an influential branch of profession theory, this approach characterizes social pedagogy as a 'reflexive profession' (Dewe and Otto, 1996; Otto, Polutta and Ziegler, 2009; Dewe et al., 2011). In this sense, the approach argues that the core of social pedagogy lies in a reflexive dialogical process between social work practitioners and their clients based on, but not strictly limited by, organizational structures of social work, such as planning, administration and controlling. As a

reflexive professionalism, social pedagogy connects theory and practice of social work through dialogical case work (Dewe et al., 2011: 20-22).

At first glance, the four approaches briefly described above seem to have very little in common. Although they all claim to represent the essential core of what social pedagogy is and in part seem to refer to each other, there are considerable differences in what they reify as social pedagogy. Winkler's theory of social pedagogy sees social pedagogy as a particular academic and/or professional discourse that is able to describe and shape all social behaviour educationally/pedagogically and therefore provides both a specific epistemology and a specific reification of social pedagogy at the same time. Thiersch et al.'s approach of lifeworld orientation reifies social pedagogy as a practice of critical de- and reconstruction of the everyday life of social work clients. Otto et al. define social pedagogy as a dialectical relationship in which professional social workers offer services they only co-produce, whereas Dewe, Otto et al. declare social pedagogy to be a professionally and theoretically reflected dialogical process between professionals and clients.

As a minimum commonality besides their obvious differences, all theories at hand seem to reify social pedagogy as something that is centred on some sort of theoretical reflection. The four approaches seem to focus on rather different research strands to avow social pedagogy as an object though. More precisely, it is hard to tell what the actual research base for most of the approaches is, as they all draw on theories from outside social pedagogy and apply these to a rather abstract idea of social pedagogy. Apart from Winkler, they do so without defining where exactly they intend to look for social pedagogy, which makes the way in which they reify social pedagogy rather exceptional for an academic discipline of the social sciences. Therefore the chosen ways of reification can be questioned per se from a social science perspective (Neumann and Sandermann, 2008).

On the other hand, if we take these findings seriously, they might provide a first step towards a meta-theory of dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany. To take this first step though, it is helpful to assume that the lack of a clear object of social pedagogy is not primarily a problem of inadequate reification by the dominant theories at hand. Rather than that, it is foremost a problem of how theories of social pedagogy in Germany themselves have been observed to date. So far, it has been presupposed quite concordantly that there must be something like an objective identity of social pedagogy (Füssenhäuser, 2011a: 117). This identity has usually not been assumed as being a specific reification, but as being something objective, independent from reification, either determined by the 'needs of the field itself' or by a mere pluralism of ideas on the field (Dollinger, 2013: 149). Through these two different, but nevertheless both deeply positivist assumptions, the idea has been cultivated that there has to be something unique 'out there' to be checked against the variety of theories of social pedagogy (Neumann and Sandermann, 2007).

By virtue of this presupposition – that there is something which would pre-exist somewhere apart from its observation, still waiting for adequate identification – even usual synopses of theories of social pedagogy do not systematically treat the approaches they investigate as their research material. Instead, they either expect the approaches themselves to draw a unique picture of what social pedagogy is (see, critically, Dewe and Otto, 2011: 1741-1742), or they expect something outside of theory to verify those theories that are 'correct'. Usual overviews of theoretical approaches on social pedagogy therefore at best reproduce rather than critically re-interpret their material, which leads to an unsolved variety of incommensurable approaches even on a meta-level (Füssenhäuser, 2011b). This applies even to meta-theoretical analyses, which plead, in a more relativistic sense, for accepting the diversity of theoretical knowledge production in social pedagogy as the 'normal' rather than a problematic state (Füssenhäuser, 2005, 2011; Wilhelm, 2006) as they also refer to the supposedly heterogeneous and disparate reality of *the field* of social pedagogy in order to justify their argument (Neumann and Sandermann, 2007).

Given this assumption, we suggest an alternative way to meta-theoretically reify dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany. In what follows, we submit a meta-theory of theories of social pedagogy, which is loosely based on Bourdieu's epistemological approach of reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu 1996; 1998). Hereby, we hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of theories of social pedagogy in Germany, as it is our declared aim to not only amplify the differences between the respective approaches we have sketched out above, but to first and foremost show what they also have in common.

3. How to Think of Social Pedagogy as a Common Perspective

Unlike many existing synopses on theories of social pedagogy and social work in Germany, Rauschenbach and Züchner (2011) are concerned with the attempt not only to describe the variety of existing approaches, but also to systematically categorize those approaches available. Their analysis is therefore capable of generating a sort of first step meta-theory of social pedagogy. To do this precisely, the authors refer to basic ideas of the philosophy of science in order to show some significant ambiguities in theory building, such as a contradiction between normative and analytical aims of theories of social pedagogy (Rauschenbach and Züchner, 2011: 168). We feel this basic finding is an important point in order to understand theories of social pedagogy in Germany. Rauschenbach and Züchner pursue their analysis by distinguishing between 'more conceptual' and 'more analytical' theories of social pedagogy. In other words, the authors try to categorize the debate's theoretical approaches through an identification of the *degree* to which they find normative tendencies within each theory of social pedagogy examined. This is certainly worthwhile for a more detailed understanding of each of the approaches. However, at the same time, such categorization does not lead the authors to a better understanding of what it is that ties theories of social pedagogy together as such.

In place of this rationale, we argue that dominant German theories of social pedagogy may indeed vary in terms of their degree of normativity, but nevertheless show some clear commonality as far as they all show an ontological mode of reification. To give a brief definition of what we mean by 'ontological', we refer to Luhmann (2012; 2013) and Bourdieu (1996), who assert that ontological observations are observations which produce something as an observable 'fact' through blurring the very process of observation that generated the fact as such. In other words, an ontological reification is a reification equipped with the idea of unquestionable knowledge. Such knowledge correlates with the idea of the respective object's genuineness; the object 'itself' remains unaffected, no matter what the circumstances of observation may be. The empirical profile of any observed object is normatively verified through its identification right away, because each reification is strongly linked to normative assertions concerning the object, which have been enunciated beforehand. Thus ontological reifications harshly limit the contingency of the objects they identify (see Luhmann, 2013). They do not reflexively unfold the observational steps that lead to the research object they generate, but instead conceal those steps and claim 'genuine' facts as benchmarks for observational scopes. Therefore, ontological reifications operate in a highly normative manner without being obviously normative at first glance, as they do not actively introduce distinctions between normative and analytic manners of reasoning (see Bourdieu, 1996: 295). In the end, such reification is thereby even able to transfer tensions between normative ideals and analytical findings into the reified object itself. What empirically exists becomes a deficient version of what could be. The latter can thus be presented as the more genuine object compared to what is directly observable.

Such an ontological mode of reification, we argue, is what can be seen as a striking commonality of dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany. Contrary to the usual assertion in the German-language debate that there is no common idea of social pedagogy, and that because of this there cannot be any clear idea of what a theory of social pedagogy is either, our hypothesis reads as

follows: when examining the discourse on theories of social pedagogy in Germany it is possible to identify a clearly dominant, albeit more implicitly than explicitly driving idea of what a theory of social pedagogy is, as there is a certain mode of reification that prominent theoretical descriptions of social pedagogy have in common, even when they differ in terms of what their reifications of social pedagogy end up with as a result.

To not only claim but empirically test our hypothesis, it would be necessary to observe the overall debate on theories of social pedagogy in Germany with a focus on processes of reification. As opposed to usual synopses, such an approach would – firstly – neither try to reify any common object nor any common subject (e.g., a typology of authors or schools) of theories of social pedagogy. Secondly, it would be interested *in* theories of social pedagogy but not in performing *as* a theory of social pedagogy, which means that it would be normatively detached from the problem of ‘identity’ and therefore interested in differences and commonalities of theories of social pedagogy alike. At this point, we can only exemplify our argument on how these theories reify social pedagogy ontologically.

We will do this using the example of the lifeworld orientation approach, which we have chosen this example as it has gained a lot of attention not only in Germany, but also abroad (see, e.g., various chapters in Cameron and Moss, 2011). In order to analyse the approach in terms of how it reifies social pedagogy, we firstly refer to an English quote by Klaus Grunwald and Hans Thiersch (2009), who can certainly be seen as the two main authors of this approach. They give us a brief definition of lifeworld orientation when they state:

The term ‘lifeworld orientation’, here used as a synonym for ‘everyday orientation’, describes a conceptual framework for [...] the two fields of German professional activity that [...] are broadly equivalent to social work and social care. [...] Social work and social care with a lifeworld orientation is a practical science [...], in which theoretical discourses and models for practice develop in mutual reference, without one simply being derived from the other. (p. 131)

When carefully dissecting this definition, we can already point at some findings regarding our research interest. We can observe that there is a double claim to represent a distinct ‘conceptual framework’ for social pedagogy on the one hand, and a ‘practical science’ of social pedagogy on the other. While it does not yet become entirely clear here, the approach seems only able to reach this goal by virtue of an ontological, or at least tautological, mode of reification. When Grunwald and Thiersch assert that it is ‘lifeworld orientation’ which ‘gives social pedagogy practice a concrete form’ as an ‘ideally’ definable version of ‘interpersonal action characterised by focused, problem-solving actions, and by actions targeting the successful everyday’(p. 140), it becomes obvious that they reach the point where their tautological reasoning flows into ontology. Following Grunwald and Thiersch, social pedagogy and lifeworld orientation end up being the exact same thing. In other words, with Grunwald and Thiersch social pedagogy finds its true inner self only through lifeworld orientation.

There are also other sources that deliver findings for an ontological reification of lifeworld oriented social pedagogy. At the core of the lifeworld orientation approach is the idea that everyday life determines social reality, including the social reality that social pedagogy as a professional practice is presented with (see Thiersch, 2006: 43). A theory that reifies social pedagogy based on such an idea of a uniform social reality must conclude that all social pedagogy is ontologically situated within everyday life, even if it was a practice of social pedagogy that the lifeworld orientation approach would define as not lifeworld-oriented, but traditional, out-dated or ‘colonizing# (Thiersch, 2009: 25). If we accepted this ontological reification of everyday life though, that would mean that all social pedagogy, which does not follow a lifeworld orientation approach, either misconceives the social reality that surrounds it, or is not social pedagogy anyway. The ontological mode of reification becomes very clear at this point: the lifeworld orientation approach argues that

everyday life challenges and enables all 'real' social pedagogy to become a fully developed, i.e. lifeworld-oriented social pedagogy.

Elsewhere, Thiersch describes the 20th century as a century of social pedagogy (see Thiersch, 2009: 235-254). Here again, it becomes obvious how the lifeworld orientation approach employs an ontological mode of reification to generate social pedagogy as such. By virtue of a teleological argument, Thiersch reads the end of the 20th century in Germany as a time close to the acme of 'actual' social pedagogy, because it is here and now that social pedagogy has come close to principles of lifeworld orientation:

Today's social pedagogy is the result of fundamental changes in our society's structure and consciousness; changes that determine social pedagogy in terms of particular constellations and accountabilities. Yet while these historically contingent developments have shaped the image of social pedagogy, it becomes increasingly clear that they drift to take a coherent form, i.e. a form of social pedagogy, which is determined by one universal principle throughout its branched institutions and activities: the principle of lifeworld orientation. (Thiersch, 2009, p. 239⁴)

We like to point out several findings referring to this quote. Firstly, the approach repeatedly suggests that there is not only a conceptual idea but also a social reality of lifeworld orientation. Secondly, it argues that this social reality of lifeworld orientation is the same as what can be called actual social pedagogy. Thirdly, this reification puts the normative idea of lifeworld orientation into a position from which it can decide on all matters of social pedagogy – or even social reality. We conclude that the lifeworld orientation approach always reifies social pedagogy as some merely normative entity, even where it claims to describe and explain it analytically. The approach is insofar ontological and anti-empirical, as it structurally 'knows' that practices of 'real social pedagogy' always aim at a lifeworld orientation approach. So, even when it identifies practices of social pedagogy that do not fit to the lifeworld orientation approach, the approach interprets those practices in a highly ontological manner as either still developing towards lifeworld orientation or as not being social pedagogy.

We can only claim here that the three other approaches we sketched earlier in this paper reason in a very similar way (for a broader overview, see Neumann/Sandermann, 2007; Dollinger, 2013), although they end up with quite different reifications of social pedagogy (see 2). Even though they do not reify lifeworld orientation as 'the core' of social pedagogy but instead understand social pedagogy as a distinct pedagogical discourse (Winkler), a dialectical service relationship (Otto et al.), or a reflexive dialogue between clients and professionals that aims to merge theoretical knowledge, organizational preconditions, the client's subjective interests and professional experience (Dewe, Otto et al.), they theorize social pedagogy in a very similar way, as something that is deeply bound to whatever normative idea the respective theory puts into the centre of its reification. Whether obviously supported by empirical findings or not, it is always this additional normative core idea that social pedagogy is linked to and has therefore to be centred at.

With its specific mode of reification, theories of social pedagogy in Germany represent the ontological assumption that social work practice itself would already *contain* a best practice (see Bitzan, Bolay, and Thiersch, 2006), which can be identified both as the normative core idea of the respective *theory* of social pedagogy and as a thought that describes 'real social work *practice* as it

⁴ Orig. German: 'Heutige Sozialpädagogik ist das Ergebnis von prinzipiellen Veränderungen in Struktur und Bewußtsein unserer Gesellschaft, von Veränderungen, die die Sozialpädagogik in Form partikularer Konstellationen in ihren Zuständigkeiten und Abgrenzungen bestimmen. So sehr aber diese historisch kontingenten Entwicklungen das Bild geprägt haben und bis jetzt prägen, sie treiben zunehmend deutlicher auf eine in sich stimmige Gestalt hin, auf eine Sozialpädagogik nämlich, die in ihren verzweigten Institutionen und Aktivitäten bestimmt ist durch ein durchgängiges Prinzip, durch das Prinzip der Lebensweltorientierung.' (Thiersch, 2009, p. 239)

is actually meant to be'. Such an ontological assumption sets a benchmark for existing practice in practice itself. It also claims rules for the mode of theoretical knowledge production to be preferred by the academic discipline. In summary, this mode of reification functions both tautologically and anti-empirically, as it does not allow any further knowledge on practice out of what was already known about social pedagogy.

Conclusion: Why do theories of social pedagogy in Germany work the way they work, and what can we learn from German theories of social pedagogy?

We hope that our argument could demonstrate that there is a variety of social pedagogies, which theories of social pedagogy in Germany produce, but also a very common ontological mode of reification, which dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany apply. In our paper, we could only exemplify how all of the dominant theories of social pedagogy introduced earlier in this paper reify social pedagogy. We suggest that it is exactly this ontological mode of reification of social pedagogy that all dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany have in common. This mode holds serious consequences for how theoretical reasoning is cultivated in the academic discipline of social pedagogy in the German-speaking context, and it shapes the notion of the 'usual way' of theoretical knowledge production in social work practice. Through the ontological and thus self-verifying mode of reification described above, dominant theories of social pedagogy in Germany manage to perform as authentic speakers in the name of 'social work itself'.

We argue that, by virtue of this, social pedagogy as an academic discipline aims to maintain the right to exclusively represent a variety of professional fields in academia. It appears evident that this miscellaneous ambition might be hazardous, as it relentlessly challenges both the rules of practice within academia and within the professional fields that theories of social pedagogy claim to represent. To use a popular phrase from the field as an allegory, we can say that theories of social pedagogy are constantly at risk of academic 'burnout', as – from the point of view of their neighbour disciplines, most notably sociology, psychology, and political sciences – they do not keep enough distance from the aspirations of the objects they work with. This might be one important reason why it is traditionally hard for social pedagogy in Germany to withstand academic critique from the interdisciplinary scientific community.

This, however, does not mean that the dominant theories of social pedagogy developed in Germany so far have been 'wrong'. We would like to emphasize that, in our opinion, it is not academically profitable simply to discredit the ontological mode of reification described above as some 'bad academic practice'. While one can normatively judge ontological modes of reification as one sees fit, and refer to whatever code might be appropriate for this judgment, it is not *our* goal to do so here. Instead, we want to underline that what we have analysed so far can teach us much on the specific location of social pedagogy among the academic disciplines in Germany and the constraints for theory building that arise from this location.

So, we would like to finish with an explanation for the mode of reification, which we have described. In order to do so, we will not provide a detailed historical contextualization of the debate on social pedagogy in Germany, although there might be convincing ways to explain how theories of social pedagogy in Germany and abroad have developed historically, e.g. via an approach of new historicism (see Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2001) or with the help of a transnational social work research approach (see Köngeter and Schröer, 2013). We would like to limit ourselves to a more basic sociological reflection so as to show a specific functionality of current theories of social pedagogy in Germany.

Social pedagogy, since its beginnings at German universities in the 1920s and 30s, has had to have as its target a double recognition from both the academic and the professional field. As the number of academics involved in fulfilling this duty was quite small – and still is small when related to the

number of students and professionals that academic research and degree programmes of social pedagogy have to serve – it seems understandable that theoreticians have developed a basic idea of social pedagogy as an academic practice that has to deliver *both* descriptions of field practice and descriptions of better field practice *at the same time*. This idea is reflected in the circular structure that dominant theories of social pedagogy in today's Germany show, as they try to answer this double purpose. The common ontological mode of reification that theories of social pedagogy show can therefore be seen as highly relevant, maybe even for understanding the 'epistemic doxa' (Bourdieu, 1998: 129) of Germany's social pedagogy in general.

A meta-perspective that highlights this doxa is, once again, no dismissive critique of social pedagogy. In fact it aims to show what similarities dominant theories of social pedagogy show besides their different reifications and how a more detailed analysis of these similarities might even depict how German social pedagogy works more generally.

Maybe an interesting question is whether the meta-perspective we have tried to sketch out in this paper could be appropriate not only for theories of social pedagogy in modern Germany alone, but instead is suitable as a broader concept of how theories of social pedagogy in general, or even those theories of social work which are not associated with the idea of social pedagogy, are usually generated to gain the dual academic and professional recognition mentioned above. However, it would need wide and careful empirical research on theories of social work *and* social pedagogy *beyond* Germany to scrutinize this presumption. We would emphatically like to encourage such scrutiny.

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* **Dr. Philipp Sandermann** is a Professor of Social Pedagogy at the University of Trier, Germany since 2011. He received both his diploma degree in social pedagogy (2004) and his PhD (2008) at the Free University of Berlin and was a visiting research associate at the University of Chicago from 2009 to 2010. His fields of interests include international comparisons of social work practice, welfare state sociology, child advocacy and welfare consumer protection, and research on social work theory. **Dr. Sascha Neumann** is a Professor of Educational Research at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland and head of the University's Centre for Early Childhood Education (ZeFF). He received his PhD at the University of Trier in 2007 for his dissertation on theory building in German social pedagogy. Before joining the University of Fribourg he worked as senior researcher at the University of Luxembourg and co-led several research and development projects focusing on the quality of publicly funded early childhood education. His main research interests include the theory and history of social work, social studies of early childhood, quality of early childhood education services as well as multilingual education in the early years.

*Correspondence to: Prof. Dr. Philipp Sandermann, University of Trier, Department No. 1 - Educational Sciences, Research Unit: Social Pedagogy II, 54286 Trier, Germany. Email: sandermann@uni-trier.de
Prof. Dr. Sascha Neumann, Université de Fribourg, Department of Education, Rue P.-A. Faucigny 2, 1700 Fribourg, Switzerland. Email: sascha.neumann@unifr.ch*