

BOOK REVIEWS

Europäische Dimensionen Sozialer Arbeit, by Günter J. Friesenhahn and Anette Kniephoff-Knebel, Schwalbach, Germany, Wochenschau Verlag, 2011, 223 pp., €15 (paperback), ISBN 9783899743791

Social work emerged in local and national contexts. Thus, asking the question about 'European dimensions of social work' is not necessarily obvious and yet essential. As European integration not only concerns aspects of economic growth, reflection must be situated in a wider context. Already because of the mobility of European citizens, social work is confronted with cross-national topics and problems. Focusing on traditional positioning and solutions, it reaches its limits and it is difficult not to agree with the authors that an opening up will become necessary.

The authors of this book have been working on these issues for several years. The spectacular reference list with more than 400 entries testifies to their mastery of the subject, which also appears in the structure of book. After the introduction, eight well-balanced and arranged chapters develop the following aspects.

The historical outline (chapter 2) gives detailed information and facts about the beginnings and precursors of social work in the nineteenth century, followed by the foundation of international organisations as well as the developments after the Second World War: a hermeneutic bow to present time. The third chapter, entitled 'Comparison', can be seen as the methodological centrepiece. As the authors mention, not without regret, the comparative perspective is not a natural feature of theory building in social work (p. 35). In order to contribute to the improvement of this situation, they proceed to a pragmatic presentation of their methodological approach identifying five steps: (1) definition of the comparison object and of the research questions; (2) choice of relevant comparison categories; (3) collection of country-specific data and facts (description); (4) comparison and systematisation of data, and finally (5) interpretation and evaluation of the comparison results (p. 53). This solid chapter can be used without further notice as methodological guideline for comparative research work, not only in the context of social work. The multiple references permit the scientific traceability, increasing at the same time the quality of the approach and the whole publication.

The 'debates' (chapter 4) about European Social Work are another highlight of the book. The complexity and plurality of the topic appear already in the diverse denominations specifying the contextual reference frame of the social work approach like 'European', 'international', 'southern', 'transnational' or 'cross-border'. It becomes clear at this moment that the issue will not find an easy solution. Already the question of definitions between the theoretical and empirical level shows the Babylonian character of the enterprise. The problem lies not in the comparability of the practical work

approaches but more in the—seemingly—irreconcilable epistemological differences. For the chapter about the 'developments' (chapter 5), the focus is then put on the 'transnational dimension' where 'social development' is identified as the relevant concept. In 'framings' (chapter 6), the authors state the common points of social work in Europe: it is in all countries a part of the political and administrative intervention system. Via a reflection on social work under 'market conditions', the chapter presents 'the European Social Model' of the European Commission (p. 122). However, this status of the political intention from the 1990s does not seem convincing. The various critical citations sow doubts and lead to thinking that it is in fact rather a hypothesis than a reality.

The obligatory 'mobility' chapter (7) identifies the right of European citizens to change their geographical and nation-state locations as a cornerstone of the European Union. Because of the educational character of the mobility programmes, probably, the chapter serves at the same time as an introduction to the topics linked to 'vocational training' (chapter 8). The last chapter (9) gives an overview of the 'perspectives'. Conformity, standardisation and harmonisation are rejected as development options for social work (p. 176). Instead, the authors identify the need for 'contextualisation' and a new handling of 'difference', underlining the absence of a shared definition as well as the discrepancy between social work's own expectations (p. 186).

The book represents serious scientific work on a difficult topic. In a wide and mainly unstructured thematic area such work is not without risks. The authors tackle these difficulties with well-argued and well-founded research work and a solid methodological reflection. Notably, their methodological proposal to approach the European dimension in social work will find surely an interested readership. This third chapter in itself justifies buying the book. Furthermore, the whole first half of the work including notably historical aspects and discussions gives a solid overview. Concerning the formal structuration, the chapters are following a logical sequence. But regarding the density of information it would have been useful to apply some supportive stylistic elements. Even if the book is rich in factual information, in the second half one notes an increasing difficulty in maintaining scientific rigour, especially regarding definitions. One may regret, then, that authors apply their own methods more stringently, especially in terms of definitions and comparisons. Even if one can understand how it came about, the close and nearly exclusive cohabitation of mobility and education seems amazing. Mobility in the European context has much more of a significant relevant dimension for social work than merely an educational one. And one may regret that the training chapter does not try to propose, even as a propaedeutic construction, a first list of specific skills characterising the (new?) European social worker (for example, based on the reflections pp. 154–155).

One difficulty of the work lies without doubt in the intrinsic Janus-face of social work. The double mandate forces researchers to look for a meticulous definition of epistemological basis. Who have what kind of needs? From where are orders coming? Who is or should be interested in research results? And these are only three examples of essential questions that researchers need to treat before approaching the topic. The broad field of social work crossed with the complex multitude of cultures in Europe is difficult to handle. Although the book achieves

this goal only partially, it still provides an interesting overview and a precious basis for further work.

Dominique Kern
Department of Education
Université de Haute Alsace, Mulhouse, France
dominique.kern@uha.fr
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