

**Heinz Schmidt**

**Values and Ethical Reflection in Diaconal and Social work in Communities**

**Community work, Christian social work and social work** at large seem nearly identical at first glance, at least when the terms are understood as concrete help for and with socially disadvantaged people. From this perspective, diaconal community work is social work motivated by Christian concerns and largely overlaps with general social work. Social work and community work, for their part, presuppose different but nonetheless altruistic commitments to values. The close relationship between these thematic terms is thus clear.

All types of social work correspond to particular values and thus should also be subject to ethical reflection. Even if social work wanted to be understood purely in terms of social systems theory—that is, if its goal were merely the maintenance of social systems—it would still have to take certain guiding values as its basis and accept ethical reflection on these values.

The immediate usefulness of ethical reflection for community work *is* limited, in fact. One should not expect reflection on values to yield practical knowledge that can be put into practice in the form of directives. But reflection on values generates knowledge based on ethical orientation, which plays an important role in communication. Values should provide motivation, assurance and legitimacy, as well as serving as criteria for legislation and for planning and evaluation of specific actions in communities. The choice of whether to design a nursing

system for the elderly people based on community networks and solidarity of neighbours or one based instead on the individual financial capacity of clients will lead to significant structural differences in terms of the final outcome.

*Professional ethics as means of personal orientation and the need of mutual understanding*

Without a doubt, ethical reflection provides both a foundation for social community work and a sense of orientation from both an individual and societal perspective. The increasing pluralization of society has made the need for consensus-building that much more necessary. On the one hand, the social work profession must publicly justify its societal contribution with an integrated and plausible value framework in order to achieve a commensurate level of public institutionalization, which is by no means uncontroversial. On the other hand, the plurality of personal and professional ethical beliefs and practices necessitates a critical scrutiny and an approach which is consensus-oriented, because the individual actors are required to engage in cooperative action with their clients in mind. If we also consider the particular kind of contribution made by social work, which needs to be carried out together with persons in need (that is what is meant by the *uno actu* principle), then the necessity of an agreement about possibly diverse moral views will be immediately clear. Even if no moral agreement can be achieved among all actors, at least a mutual appreciation of values must be attained.

The focus of ethical reflection on communication among actors gains additional complexity through the way it is framed as a specific professional ethic. Professionalism presupposes a particular set of competencies gained through education, training and experience as well as knowledge about the profession's

function in society and the sensitivities and expectations of one's respective clientèle. In addition to the development of pertinent knowledge, the historical and cultural development of values is operative.

Without expanding on that last point, I would simply like to point out here that aside from the market and the state there is a multifaceted space within which the activities of civil society have developed. In this space, the modern social professions have the effect of integrating society and providing meaning, in addition to their specific connections to subsystems. Community work is actually a focus of all these professions. For all we can agree with sociologist Stichweh when he said that these professions reflect the concept behind their job "that is, they consciously cultivate, codify, write down and thus transform the knowledge and the ethos of their profession..... The reflexive use of the professional concept includes professional socialization with corresponding habitualization and knowledge of the social claims associated with the profession."<sup>1</sup> One of Stichweh's early observations that is particularly applicable to pastoral care givers, educators and social workers is that these professions are dealing with a significant cultural tradition and a corresponding body of knowledge, "which are differentiated in modern society in the form of the analytical perspective of a social subsystem". They focus on "action and interpretation in *systems of interaction*," keeping in mind the problems "of structural change and development and the *maintenance of the identity of persons*."<sup>2</sup> In plain language this means that the task of these professions goes beyond their social-systemic integration to individual formation and community

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Stichweh, "Professionen in einer funktional differenzierten Gesellschaft" in *Pädagogische Professionalität*, ed. V. A. Combe/W. Helsper (Frankfurt/Main 1996), 51.

<sup>2</sup> R. Stichweh, "Professionalisierung, Ausdifferenzierung von Funktionssystemen, Inklusion" in *Erzählen als Profession*, ed. v. B. Dewe/, W. Ferchhoff and F.-O. Radke (Opladen 1992), 43

building, by which even the system-related demands of conformist behavior can be subverted. From this perspective we are dealing with autonomy, the capacity for relationships, and the search for meaning and moral identity, which are able to integrate and make sense of failure and biographical breaks. Reflection on questions of meaning and values plays a central role here.

### *Implicit Ethics in Social Work*

The explanations provided so far have made it clear that “ethics” is indispensable for how a profession understands its role. The classical professions (pastors, doctors, lawyers) each have had and have specific ethical codes—some of which have been partially enshrined in legal form—which are components of training and the object of continual reflection. Ethics courses are also generally required as part of the education and training of social workers, although their content up to now has more often focused on cultivating personal meaning and life orientation rather than addressing professional questions. More recently, however, social work degree programs have identified professional ethics as key.<sup>3</sup> Aside from ethical approaches or theoretical models that still need to be explored more explicitly, in the conventional theory formation of social work, ethical fundamentals are always implicit already even when they are not stated explicitly.

This can be shown by the so called “living environment” approach in social work (Hans Thiersch) which is one of the theoretical sources of the community orientation of today. This approach obliges you to examine the subjective understanding and interactive reconstruction of the individuals in their everyday

---

<sup>3</sup> Culminating perhaps in the ethical qualification for an entire course of studies in Berlin called “Soziale Arbeit als Menschenrechtsprofession” (transl. “Social work as a human rights profession.”)

life. The focus of social work was thus shifted to individuals (who are disadvantaged) as well as their relationships to other people and their social environment, whereby subjective opportunities for action and social-pedagogical opportunities for intervention also attracted new interest. This approach has not been surpassed to date, although its basic principles have been modified and refined, especially with regard to the social and cultural resources and possibilities to act of needy people in a specific local or social space (= Sozialraum). From an ethical perspective, it combines an individual need for orientation, an ethos of solidarity with the disadvantaged, and the goal of enabling self-determination.

Two significant further developments of this approach are of great importance today. On the one hand, the concept of a “life situation” expands the concept of a “living environment” by including concrete analyses of society that allow the circumstances in a given person’s environment to be measured empirically, as well as her opportunities for access and participation or factual exclusion. These can then be correlated with the self-perception of the person concerned. On the other hand, elements from liberation pedagogy in the tradition of Paolo Freire, originally connected with literacy campaigns, have been developed further. Through processes of dialogue, disadvantaged rural populations were encouraged to identify, describe and advocate for their own interests. They were thus able to experience themselves as creators of their own culture and society and learned to reflect on this process. The concept of liberation pedagogy receives serious attention in Christian social service and is viewed as a concretization of the liberation theology tradition. In addition to solidarity and autonomy, the guiding ethical perspectives are hope, education and fostering a

democratic mentality.

### *Independent Professional Ethics*

The care concept, derived from a somewhat different tradition, was an indirect application of the ethics of care, developed by psychologist Carol Gilligan in contrast to the work of her teacher Lawrence Kohlberg. In his research on moral development, Kohlberg had postulated an ethos of justice as the highest developmental level. Gilligan reluctantly observed that in the application of Kohlberg's method women only ever reached the lower levels of development. She then ascertained that women were more likely to use relationship criteria rather than justice criteria as their basis for making decisions about moral dilemmas. Gilligan related this to the stepladder of a "feminine" relationship ethic and was convinced of its empirical verifiability. Translated into ethics this became a relationship ethic in which the orientation to the needs of one's relationship partners is given top priority. A much-discussed problem with the ethics of care is its relationship to the "masculine" type of an ethic of justice, which for its part clearly follows society's standards. Ruth Grossmass<sup>4</sup> proposes keeping two perspectives in mind at the same time. In the "core business" of social work (327), which is work in teams and with persons in need, the central values of an ethics of care—care for others and one's self—are brought into a personally appropriate balance, while in more abstract areas related to societal politics, responsibility applies to societal groups and structures, which are crucial for various aspects of justice. The author certainly leaves the question open as

---

<sup>4</sup> "Die Bedeutung der Care-Ethik für die soziale Arbeit" in S. Dungs et al., *Sozialarbeit und Ethik im 21. Jahrhundert*, 319-338.

to which perspective is to be preferred and can be justified in conflict situations. If one takes an ethics of care as one's basis, then one cannot avoid formulating a goal which is continually shaped by society. One could argue for a formula emphasizing the principles of the ethics of care in the sense of empowerment or a preference for disadvantaged groups based on liberation pedagogy with the goal of making clients capable of acting for democratic processes of self-advocacy on the basis of justice. For me an unreserved application of the ethics of care to relationships in social work remains problematic for another reason. The danger of emotional dependency—for both parties—seems likely. The obvious comparison with the Christian love for one's neighbor teaches us that differentiations are necessary here concerning responsibilities and obligations for the independent development and effects on others.

A much more complex ethical concept that can be better adapted internationally is Staub-Bernasconi's understanding of social work as a human rights profession. In keeping with the forementioned concept of the "living environment" orientation, Staub-Bernasconi criticizes a perspective traditionally predominant among social service providers which, when brought together with the concept of normalization, encourages an understanding of social work as a kind of "repair service." In contrast, the internationally recognized professional understanding is that social work is committed to social change<sup>5</sup> and oriented towards the needs of individuals so that social work defined its own tasks itself in order to "put these into practice together with other associations, governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and movements."

---

<sup>5</sup> "The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being," IFSW Definition of Social Work, URL: <http://www.ifsw.org/p38000208.html>.

These make it possible for the profession “to realize an important characteristic of professionalism: the ability to set specific, self-determined tasks.”<sup>6</sup>in the framework of the professional ethos. These independent tasks constitute a third mandate of social work aside from the first two—the claims of the social authorities and clients—which social workers must possibly confront critically in some circumstances (from a double to a triple mandate).

In keeping with Werner Obrecht<sup>7</sup>, Staub-Bernasconi presupposes a universal hierarchy of needs that all people have in common, within which physical, sensory, psychic, social and cultural needs are distinct. These provide the justification for the existence of universal rights and therefore for universal *human* rights, which is the reason we can dispense with questionable justifications based on natural rights as well as particular religious justifications for human rights. Human rights, differentiated according to the rights of freedom, social rights and rights of participation, guarantee the adequate fulfillment of biological, psychological and socio-cultural needs, thus safeguarding human dignity. According to this concept, human dignity is dependent on the actual respect of human rights, although at the same time it should also be viewed as inalienable and independent of any ascribed or acquired characteristics, lifestyles, achievements or individual merits. Human dignity can only be realized when “people find themselves in an objective and subjective state of well-being and deviations from this condition can be rectified or [well-being] can be retained through one’s own or collective resources and

---

<sup>6</sup> Staub-Bernasconi, *Soziale Arbeit als (eine) Menschenrechtsprofession*, 30 + 28.

<sup>7</sup> Werner Obrecht, *Umriss einer biopsychocultural Theorie menschlicher Bedürfnisse. Geschichte, Probleme, Struktur, Funktion* (Zürich 42005, 47. The text (in German) can be found online at <http://blog.rebell.tv/files/werner%20obrecht%202005.pdf>.



efforts.”<sup>8</sup> Correspondingly, the discovery of human rights is due to historical experiences in which human needs were disregarded or denied. Seen in this way, they are the “product of conflictual social and cultural processes [...] and can be viewed as historical responses to the endangerment and denial of the fulfillment of needs.”<sup>9</sup> With Obrecht we should distinguish needs from wishes. While needs are directly related to the experience of “‘being human’ to various degrees and thus to a life lived with dignity,” wishes are in danger of increasing at an inflationary rate and “know no limits or rules for when to stop, at least in one’s imagination.”<sup>10</sup> The distinction between needs and wishes suggests needs can only lead to concrete, universally valid imperatives for action once an assessment of needs has taken place. According to Staub-Bernasconi, the criteria for this assessment are universal human needs as determined through empirical research, which cannot be classified as individual wishes due to their universal validity. Second, human rights are related to values which “mostly trace back to profound experiences of suffering and injustice, long-standing conflictual processes of articulation, scandalization and codification.”<sup>11</sup> In keeping with the *Manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession*, Staub-Bernasconi matches needs to the following values:

- life,
- liberty,
- equality and non-discrimination,
- justice,
- solidarity,
- social responsibility,

---

<sup>8</sup> Silvia Staub-Bernasconi, “Der Beitrag einer systemischen Ethik zur Bestimmung von Menschenwürde und Menschenrechten in der Sozialen Arbeit, in S. Dungs et al (eds.), *Sozial Arbeit und Ethik im 21. Jahrhundert*, 282.

<sup>9</sup> Staub-Bernasconi, *Selbstverständnis*, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Obrecht as quoted in Staub-Bernasconi, *Beitrag*, 282.

<sup>11</sup> Staub-Bernasconi, *Sozial Arbeit als (eine) Menschenrechtsprofession*, 29.

- evolution (or development),
- peace and non-violence,
- relationships between humans and nature.

Because of these values, we can hold onto rights which “ought to be ascribed to every person in an international social order—that is, a new world order for society.”<sup>12</sup> These rights constitute a “kind of symbolic and cultural resource which makes it possible for social work to emphasize its own professional intentions, independent from the authorities of the social welfare state and in critical dialogue with clients.”

The connection between needs and values is thus also necessary because humans do not possess a homogeneous, somewhat hierarchically organized structure of needs, but rather a thoroughly contradictory one. Correspondingly, they do not orient their actions based solely on the maximization of rational utility to satisfy their own needs. People express solidarity, for example, by foregoing privileges and allow themselves to be otherwise guided by emotions and values. People are integrated into both voluntary and involuntary relationships of care and relationships shaped by the market and reciprocal exchange as well as vertical power relationships and thus social systems. Each of these social systems possesses its own structural rules and rules for interaction as a condition that enables, hinders or denies a *humane* life and its necessary resources. The professional ethos of social work involves engaging with the social system and its rules—for and with clients—with the intention of attaining a way of life that respects human rights and fulfills their needs.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

*Human rights as an offer of universalization in historical and cultural context*

*– an Assessment from the Perspective of the Study of Christian Social Service (Diakonie)*

By and large, those working in Diaconia and community work have welcomed the ethical profile of social work as a human rights profession. In fact, it allows Christian social welfare to connect individual attention with assistance in achieving goals such as developing autonomy and competence, while also relating community work to social advocacy and political advocacy on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged in the biblical sense—all concepts of values that have developed independently in the course of the professionalization of Christian social work since the 1960s. With the ethos of human rights, Christian social service providers believe they have also found a universal moral practice which allows them to work together with both non-Christian groups and helps establish norms and standards for international work which may not otherwise be acknowledged in the same way in other cultures and religions. I would argue, however, that this hope is deceptive. My depiction of the human rights approach to Christian social welfare already made it clear that, while universal human needs can be presupposed, these are heterogeneous, unsystematic, contradictory and by no means life-giving in and of themselves. In order to develop human dignity out of needs, certain needs must be linked to certain concepts of values, which need to be set apart positively from other, often unnamed but rather more dangerous needs. The need for attention and intimacy, which is supposed to provide the foundation for solidarity, contradicts, for example, the individual need to personally enforce one's own power and achieve control, both of which can even be combined with fatal consequences. Not only is the justification based on needs dependent on values and culture,

but also the ways and the forms in which those needs are satisfied which guarantees well-being. For example, consider the need of relationships which is certainly universal but the forms in which they can be satisfied is affected by cultural norms even in the most liberal societies. Deviations are punished either with sanctions or therapies.

Despite these relativizations, an ethos of human rights can orient social work, precisely because of its undisputed relationship to human needs *and* cultural values and due to its equally undisputed origins in the experience of suffering and repression. Human rights are the result of the hard-fought historical process by which the “de-particularization” of various ethical traditions was achieved, transforming similar motives in Christian, Stoic, natural law, Enlightenment and socialist traditions. For that reason a universalizing tendency was already inherent. Without a doubt, human rights are an ethical cultural treasure of the West, admittedly with roots in the Near East. At the same time, they offer something to other cultures, which can adapt human rights to their own context, thus de-particularizing themselves in order to be able to participate in a universal ethos. Through their own conflicts, people must discover their own rights and corresponding ways of life. One certainly cannot impose them on others with claims to universal validity.

The aims of this lecture were as follows:

- Awareness of the role of values in community work
- Comprehension of Professional Ethics as contribution to professional and individual autonomy
- Knowledge of the most important actual concepts of Professional Ethics in social work
- Reflection on a Human Rights Ethic as basis of community work and a diaconal approach to Human Rights.