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Systemic social work in Germany

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"Systemic social work" is, as a term¹ and as a concept, not yet widespread in Germany. To date, systemic approaches are used above all in therapy and counselling, namely by doctors and psychologists (those licensed to do counselling in Germany) as well as social workers in so far as they do counselling. Whether a form of "systemic social work" exists or should exist outside of the framework of therapy and counselling (or whether this term should only be used to describe counselling in various, non-therapeutic fields) is much debated, even among the better-known contributors to systemic social work². Their descriptions of systemic social work in Germany would probably be quite different from the subsequent considerations.

¹ In Germany, the difficulties begin with finding a clear definition of social work. Various terms (Sozialarbeit, Soziale Arbeit, Sozialpädagogik, Sozialwesen) are used, often synonymously, in other cases divergently. This is possibly one of several factors why the profession often demonstrates such a lack of self-confidence.

² for example Heiko Kleve, Wilfried Hosemann, Wolf Ritscher, Ulrich Pfeiffer-Schaupp

History

In the 1970s and 1980s, family therapy concepts that had emerged in the United States and Italy found a footing and spread in Germany. Translations of American and Italian authors and a growing number of German-language publications, growing numbers of conferences, workshops and trainings offered by larger and smaller institutes all led to the spread of systemic / family therapy concepts and methods. Since family therapy did and still does not fall under the spectrum of therapy forms covered by public health insurance in Germany, the training could be made available to all mental health professionals. Many social workers took part, not infrequently in the (often unfulfilled) hope that they might thereby gain in status and prestige, find new career opportunities and income sources.

The fact that access to training was uncomplicated, the freshness and unusual nature of its contents and its practicality probably contributed significantly to the spread of family therapy and later of systemic approaches in social work. Today, "knowledge of systemic counselling," if not completed training modules are often mentioned as requirements in vacancy announcements for social workers - even if it is at times unclear, what exactly this means.

The systemic field is a large market in Germany, a variety of large and small institutes have emerged offering a wide variety of training and qualification modules in systemic counselling and therapy, but also in supervision and coaching for certain issues (trauma, child therapy, etc.). The two major systemic therapy umbrella organisations - the DGSF and the SG³ - have each developed (similar) certification systems that are based primarily on formal criteria (scope, qualification of teaching staff). The core certificates are for "systemic counselling" (of ca. 400 hours) and - building upon it - "systemic therapy" (of another ca. 500 hours), other modules that are offered include "systemic supervision," "systemic educational therapist" and "systemic child and adolescent psychotherapy"⁴. Significant differences can be found in the focus of these various approaches, ranging from development-oriented to systemic-ecological or systemic-structural and systemic-constructivist techniques.

But the variety of different approaches to the systemic field and the fact that a great variety of different professions come together to take part in the training and

³ The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Therapie, Beratung und Familientherapie (German Association for Systemic Therapy, Counselling and Family Therapy,; DGSF) with ca. 3000 members (of which an estimated quarter to a third are social workers!) and the Systemische Gesellschaft (Systemic Association – SG), which was founded originally by various training institutions. Several years ago a Deutsche Gesellschaft für systemische Soziale Arbeit (German Association for Systemic Social Work – DGSSA) was founded by university professors, but it has yet to grow beyond ca. 70 members.

⁴ The DGSF has refused several requests on the part of its members to establish a certificate for "systemic social work," arguing that this kind of work was already included in its counselling certificate and that it was not their position to provide for certificates for specific professions.

qualification modules appears to me to be beneficial. The fact that these modules usually take place under the title "Therapy/Counselling" is, on the other hand, a discreet form of discrimination, i.e. discrimination by the omission of the unique aspects of social work⁵.

The unique aspects of social work

While probably more than a quarter of trained systemicists are social workers both by profession and in their day-to-day work, few if any explicit concepts of systemic thought and practice for the specificities of this profession exist.

The most important systemic authors and trainers consider themselves therapists and counsellors and have studied psychology and medicine - or they are social workers, who have "jumped ship" and now no longer consider themselves social workers but "(teaching) therapists", "supervisors" or, at the least, "counsellors" and describe themselves as such. The focus is on therapy and counselling and the qualifications that one receives is implicitly understood as such. Insofar as social work is discussed at all, it is understood as identical to counselling.

What tends to be disregarded, is that social work is much richer, more varied and (if you will) is more demanding than simple counselling and therapy.

- The work between a social worker and client includes, in addition to simple counselling, a whole range of other kinds of activities (cf. Lüssi 2001, p. 392ff⁶). These include negotiation with clients and other agencies and frequently facilitation between various institutions and organisations, obtaining a means of living (i.e. money, housing, employment, contacts, access) for clients; often they control, intervene, regulate, for example, access to help and thus at times clearly act against the wishes of their clients. Social workers act and make decisions on behalf of clients and, finally, they are often "simply there", receptive, waiting, apparently doing nothing at all - and yet it is an essential part of their work (and can include "professional waiting" "professional coffee drinking" and "professional football playing").⁷
- Social workers most often work in the context of very complex situations and expectations. In a single "case" (better: practice situation, client, assignment, mandate) many people are often involved or need to be involved, all in consideration of various mandates, laws, terms and conditions. Social workers work at the interface between people, professions and interests, they mediate

⁵ This is also true for other professions that could be dealt with more sensitively in the systemic field.

⁶ Peter Lüssi, *Systemische Sozialarbeit*, 5th Edition., Bern 2001 - This work by the Swiss author first published in 1995 has, despite its programmatic sounding title, in my mind little to with what is today understood by the majority of scholars and practitioners as systemic social work.

⁷ This "simply being there" is a common practice in social work (in Germany). It is nevertheless hardly reflected upon theoretically and is not taught.

and negotiate between them. They carry great responsibility, every day they make a variety of large and small, not always conscious decisions that may have a substantial impact on their clients and on their work with them.

- Social workers have to deal with a variety of settings in which they are far from a defined space for consultations; from in home visits or group home visits, from street work to an appointment at the doctor, a diner with the residential group to a visit in a discotheque, from accompanying a client to a lawyer to participating at a trial, from a day pass with a convict to a hospital visit - all this and much more is understood as a matter of course in social work (and is often enough not reflected upon critically in teaching).
- Social workers often work within organisations, in teams and networks. Therefore they must not only consider the interests of their clients, their employers and the cost bearers but also the institutions, colleagues and partners involved. They often work together in teams and are connected to regional networks.

These specific aspects of social work are usually not addressed in systemic training modules because the trainers (teaching therapists) are not aware of them or consider them irrelevant. Beside the focus on therapy and counselling the specific situation of and demands on social workers are often overlooked and thus neglected. The inability of trainers to take into consideration the overall context of social work remains a barrier to the development of systemic social work as its own concept.

This fact has consequences not the least of which is the (self-)understanding of the work of the participant social workers and practitioners of other professions who may come to the conclusion that it is only possible to work (systemically) in counselling and therapy situations. And it stands in the way of an appreciation for the fact that it could be interesting and rewarding to work systemically as a social worker.

It is for this reason that, in my mind, it is necessary - at least for a certain period of time - to develop a specific approach to systemic social work, to do justice to the professional specificities of social work and to strengthen the professional identity of social workers. Not all actors in the field of systemic social work see it this way.

A concept of systemic social work

For me, the systemic-constructivist approach is a tool that consists of theories, attitudes/world view and methods. The basis is here, in brief, a set of theoretical axioms (suppositions), assumptions about "human nature" as well as criteria for a methodical approach (the "systemic perspective") that relate to the specificities of professional social work. They include statements on the value in this approach.

Theories - methods - attitudes

A) Theoretical suppositions

- The environment that we perceive is our invention.
- Objectivity is the delusion of a subject.
- Everything said is said by someone.
- Problems are a matter of opinion.
- It could be different.
- There are always at least seven possibilities.
- Everything flows. Change is a constant. Move ahead instead of moving back.
- Small changes lead to further changes.

B) Suppositions on attitudes/world view

- All people are autonomous and have their own way how to perceive the world (are “eigensinnig”).
- People always do what they want.
- Everyone has a good reason for doing what they do.
- Mixed feelings (ambivalencies) are normal.
- Instructive interaction is not possible.
- All people want to cooperate all the time.
- All people are equal with respect to these assumptions.

Two comments:

1. The less obvious and appropriate these suppositions appear at first glance, the more useful and meaningful their application is: the more unchangeable a situation or a person appears to me, the more important it is that change is assumed; the more helpless a person appears to me, the more helpful it is (for me and for them), if they are assumed to be autonomous and “eigensinnig” – (i.e. they have their own head and their own will, they determine how they look at the world and how they interpret it, how they attribute intrinsic meaning to situations/ their perceptions).

2. The absolute nature of these statements ("all", "always", "is") does not imply their truth. Instead, it expresses their status as suppositions, as definitions that may (but must not) be applied without exception.

C) Methodical and practical focus: My systemic view is directed towards

- Resources, strengths, abilities and achievements
- Contexts
- Different perspectives
- Mandates
- Exceptions, solutions, the future

- The multiplication of options
- Autonomy and own ideas
- Willingness to cooperate
- Feelings, moods, atmosphere and humour
- Appreciation

Various methodical options emerge from this perspective. I can, for example, look specifically to identify and focus on a person's resources. I can explore the mandates I get and look for exceptions and solutions. When a person *seems* to be uncooperative, I can focus on her cooperation. If I take only some of these possibilities into account, a state of appreciation emerges.

Social work as a profession

The theories, attitudes and practices of the systemic approach are particularly suitable for social work. They can contribute to (re)establishing the capability to act (influence potential, "power"), both of the social worker as well as their clients. In the everyday work of a social worker, reality appears in many situations to be especially "hard" and immutable, change all too often appears impossible, people appear driven (from inside and out), controlled and helpless. Social workers deal with very complex situations and get involved in different ways, even and especially when they act against the wishes of their clients, when they negotiate and facilitate, when they obtain goods or even when they are simply "there." In these cases a systemic approach can be a useful tool - with its theoretical suppositions and its methodical options.

The role that tools play

- Systems exist. Right? Wrong!
- Suppositions are not true, but could eventually be useful
- Theories are tools

The metaphor of "tools" reflects on the meta-level the status I claim for the approach called "systemic social work." It is neither true nor universally valid, neither closed nor perfect. It is one instrument among others. The purpose of a tool lies not in its truth or its "rightness", but in its potential use. This depends on who wants to achieve what in a given situation.

Further approaches

Above I have presented my own concept and my own approach. They are not alone. From my perspective, the strength of the systemic concept is that it permits variety even on its theoretical and practical levels and permits a variety of options.

Differences in the various approaches are founded in claims to a closed theoretical construction or references to systems theoretical, development psychological, family dynamic or constructivist concepts and the degree to which claim is made to have developed an approach specific to the profession. In the appendix I have listed some German representatives of systemic social work and a short selection of their publications as well as a short summary of their perspective on systemic social work.

Together with a student, Nadine Lorenz, I have collected a bibliography on "systemic social work" so as to provide an overview of the German-language literature on the subject (currently ca. 370 titles and growing).

Current Developments

The discussion on systemic social work is relatively marginal within the systemic field in Germany. The major associations see no need to elaborate on professional social work from a systemic point of view. The German Association for Systemic Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für systemische Soziale Arbeit - DGSSA) remains small and has not made any significant waves. It has organised several smaller conferences in various regions in Germany in recent years. It publishes an online magazine (dgssa_journal) and is in the process of developing a certification for systemic social work. (While no other journal that specializes in systemic social work exists, at least three of the major systemic journals in Germany accept contributions on social work and by social workers: KONTEXT, systema, Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung).

Despite the demand for knowledge of systemic (counselling and therapy) in the field of social work, universities are reluctant to offer systemic seminars or programmes, limiting themselves to either seminars on system theory or inviting teaching therapists from private institutions to give workshops.

In Merseburg I myself offer two 4-day-long seminars on systemic social work that mainly introduce students to methodical tools and practise their implementation. For several years now I have begun to reserve several places in these seminars for practitioners who are interested in systemic training and pay a fee to the university. The teaching process profits significantly from their practical perspective and thus, all three sides (students, practitioners and teacher) profit from this combination.

The first German master's programme for systemic social work was established in Merseburg and ran from 2009 to 2011. The modules include, among others, theory, methods, practical implementation, research and evaluation, instruction, leadership and social economics. It also included an English language course, an excursion abroad and a final paper or workshop at a conference. For more information see www.sysoma.de. Demand for the programme is there, whether it will be offered again in 2012-2014 remains an open question. Other universities in Germany apparently see no need or do not have the capacity to develop such a programme.

Johannes Herwig-Lempp, Systemic Social Work in Germany

Since 2004 an irregular series of conferences on systemic social work have been held at various universities in Germany with 50 to 250 participants, who saw themselves as part of a specific tradition, most recently the "3. Merseburger Tagung 2 x 2 = grün - Die Vielfalt der systemischen Sozialarbeit" [3rd Merseburger Conference: 2 x 2 = Green - The diversity of systemic social work] in July 2011. Whether this series will be continued is also an open question.

Appendix

Well-known contributors to systemic social work in Germany

Wolf Ritscher, (*1948), Psychologist, retired Professor at the Hochschule Esslingen, , one of the first scholars of systemic social work, proponent of a psychoanalytical development-oriented approach

- *Ritscher, Wolf (2002), Systemische Modelle für Sozialarbeit und Therapie. Ein integratives Lehrbuch für Theorie und Praxis; Heidelberg* [Systemic models for social work and therapy. An integrative textbook for theory and practice]; Carl-Auer Verlag
- *Ritscher, Wolf (2007), Soziale Arbeit: systemisch. Ein Konzept und seine Anwendung* [Social work: systemic. A concept and its application]; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Ulrich Pfeifer-Schaupp, (*1955), Professor for Social Work at the Hochschule Freiburg, authored two books on systemic social work 10 and 15 years ago

- *Pfeifer-Schaupp, Hans-Ulrich (1997), Jenseits der Familientherapie. Systemische Konzepte in der sozialen Arbeit* [Beyond family therapy. Systemic concepts in social work]; 2nd Ed.; Freiburg: Lambertus
- *Pfeifer-Schaupp, Hans-Ulrich (Hrsg.) (2002), Systemische Praxis. Modelle - Konzepte - Perspektiven* [Systemic Praxis. Models - Concepts - Perspectives]; Freiburg: Lambertus;

Ludger Kühling (*1961), Philosopher and social worker, trainer, supervisor – occasional publications, co-developer of the master's Programme in Merseburg

- *Kühling, Ludger; 2004; Was könnten wir tun, um die Bedeutung der Systemischen Sozialarbeit möglichst gering zu halten?* [What can we do to make systemic social work as meaningless as possible?]; in: *KONTEXT*, 4/2004, Vol. 36, pp. 374-380

Heiko Kleve, (*1969), Social worker with practical experience as a case worker, Professor at the Hochschule Potsdam, active proponent of a constructivist approach, draws among others on Luhmann and his systems theory, interested in professional questions ("profession without a face")

- *Kleve, Heiko (2007); Postmoderne Sozialarbeit. Ein systemtheoretisch-konstruktivistischer Beitrag zur Sozialarbeitswissenschaft* [Post-modern social work. A system-theoretical constructivist contribution to the science of social work]; (orig. 1999); Wiesbaden: VS - Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften;
- *Kleve, Heiko (2000), Die Sozialarbeit ohne Eigenschaften. Fragmente einer postmodernen Professions- und Wissenschaftstheorie Sozialer Arbeit* [Social work

without a face. Fragments of a post-modern professional and scientific theory of social work]; *Freiburg: Lambertus*

Wilfried Hosemann, (*1948) Pedagogue and co-founder of the systemic movement in Germany (DAF). Chairman of the DGSSA

- *Hosemann, Wilfried & Wolfgang Geiling (2005), Einführung in die systemische Soziale Arbeit [Introduction to systemic social work]; Freiburg: Lambertus;*

Johannes Herwig-Lempp, (*1957), Social worker with professional experience working with drug users, psychiatric patients and in socio-pedagogical family support, Professor for systemic social work/ science of social work and founder of the first German master's programme for systemic social work.

- *Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (2009), Ressourcenorientierte Teamarbeit. Ein Lern- und Übungsbuch, [Resource oriented teamwork. A text and work book] 2nd edition ; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht*
- *Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (1994), Von der Sucht zur Selbstbestimmung. Drogenkonsumenten als Subjekte [From addiction to self-determination. Drug users as subjects]; Dortmund: verlag modernes lernen*

Jürgen Hargens, (*1947), Psychologist, one of the first systemic practitioners to receive wider recognition in Germany, founder and editor of the *Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie* [Journal for systemic Therapy], open to new forms of (social) work.

- *Hargens, Jürgen (1993), Haus und Wohnung der KundIn. Spielfeld oder Feindesland? Erste Reflexionen über Hausbesuche [The house and home of the client. Playground or enemy territory? First thoughts on in house visits in: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie, Vol. 11, Nr. 4, pp. 238-244*
- *Hargens, Jürgen (1993), KundIn, KundigE, KundschafterIn. Gedanken zur Grundlegung eines "helfenden" Zugangs [Client, expert, scout. Thoughts on the development of a "helping" approach]; in: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie, Vol. 11 Nr.1, pp. 14-20;*
- *Hargens, Jürgen (ed.) (2000); Gastgeber hilfreicher Gespräche. Wir haben Ihnen geholfen!?. Was haben wir von Ihnen gelernt? Systemische Ansätze in der sozialpädagogischen Familienhilfe [Host for helpful conversations. We have helped you!?. What can we learn from you? Systemic approaches in socio-paedagogical family support]; Dortmund: Borgmann*

(Note: While Austrian and Swiss scholars also publish in the German language, significant differences exist in how various systemic approaches in Germany are received there, if at all. Our European project "STEP – Systemic Social Work throughout Europe" will thus contribute to learning more about how systemic social work is perceived in these countries.)

Systemic German Web Pages

A selection of web pages on systemic social work and the systemic field in Germany:

- Germany Association for Systemic Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Soziale Arbeit - DGSSA): www.dgssa.org
- German Association for Systemic Therapy, Counselling and Family Therapy, (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Therapie und Familientherapie - DGSTF): www.dgstf.org
- Master's program for Systemic Social Work (sysoma), www.sysoma.de [Author: J. Herwig-Lempp]
- Systemic social work, www.systemische-sozialarbeit.de [Author: J. Herwig-Lempp]
- Systemic Society (Systemische Gesellschaft - SG), www.systemische-gesellschaft.de

Further better known authors in the systemic field

- The Heidelberg Group: Helm Stierlin, Fritz B. Simon, Gunthard Weber, Gunther Schmidt, Arnold Retzer, Jochen Schweitzer
- The Weinheim Group: Maria Bosch, Arist von Schlippe, Hans Lieb
- Bernd Schmid, Klaus Mücke, Rainer Schwing

Foreign authors that have made an impact in Germany

- Virginia Satir, Paul Watzlawick, Gregory Bateson, Lynn Hoffman, Jay Haley, Milton Erickson, Salvador Minuchin
- Mara Selvini Palazzoli, Gianfranco Cecchin, Luigi Boscolo, Guliana Prata
- Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer, Harlene Anderson, Harry Goolishian
- Constructivist/epistemological authors: Ernst von Glasersfeld, Heinz von Foerster, Humberto Maturana

Systemic Social Work - What is that?

A few years ago I asked several colleagues to provide a brief description of what they understand to be "systemic" and "systemic social work" for the website www.systemische-sozialarbeit.de. The goal was to demonstrate the variety of (different) perspectives on the field. Translations of their responses follow.

Systemic social work is the art of negotiating neutrally between the various realities, interests and mandates, descriptions of difficulties and resources of people respectfully and in consideration of their achievements thus far. Systemic social workers are diplomatic in their evaluation of situations perceived as being problematic, as well as choreographers for children, adolescents and adults to meet the many challenges of day-to-day life successfully. Systemically oriented social workers see themselves as champions of the diversity of lifeways and the concomitant life concepts, they believe in the plausibility of individual life plans and coping strategies and act as counsellors, facilitators and supervisors in the interest of maximising possibilities for action in view of the objectives of different addressees, contractors and partners. Systemic social workers see themselves as creative thinkers who know that they cannot manage partners but only stimulate them to take the initiative.

Ludger Kühling, Tübingen (December 2004)

Systemic social work is a theoretical and methodical approach within the practice and science of social work based on systems theory. Systems theory is an interdisciplinary theoretical programme that draws on diverse scientific disciplines. The hallmark of this theoretical programme is that it attempts to explain and influence the world using the system concept. A system is understood as a distinction that two sides bring forth: the system on the one side and the environment on the other. Decisive in this situation is that both system and environment each implicitly imply the other, neither can the environment influence the system nor can on the system influence the environment with any form of coherence or predictability. Changes on the one side will be taken up by the other side only insofar as they correspond to the possibilities and structures of the system or the environment respectively. Systems theory is an appropriate approach to social work among other things because it is capable of describing and explaining all social work-related processes, such as social communication, psychological perceptions and physical phenomena in both their autonomy and their interdependency.

Heiko Kleve, Berlin (October 2004)

Social work consists of scientific theories of action and a praxis that is framed by them. Theoretical concepts of systematic, methodical and reflected action serve to ensure and promote the professional support of people living in psycho-social crises, chronic discrimination and learning and socialisation processes. Systemic social work concepts are based on:

- the two central assumptions of a constructivist epistemology - the unity of the observer and the observed and the subjective construction of reality in the mind of the observer;
- a view of the social world and all intra-psychic processes as constantly changing networks of relationships;
- the idea that no one is exclusively powerless or powerful because each system of relationships provides for a scope of action that is to be explored and expanded on;
- a focus on resources that are available to expand on the scope of action of addressees (traditionally: clients) and social workers in a support system that they have developed together.

In practice, systemically thinking and acting social workers can draw on a variety of methods that have been developed in the context of systemic therapy, counselling and family therapy. The many settings of social work nevertheless requires the creative modification of these methods - which may very well contribute to the further development of systemic therapy in the narrower sense.

Wolf Ritscher, Esslingen (November 2004)

We speak of systemic social work, when praxis draws explicitly on a vision and approach that is based on systems, i.e. draws on the history of systems, considers systems in their persistence and their interdependencies, uses systemic principles as an orientation in practice, and considers the presence of the social worker in observations and as part of different systems and views systems from the perspective of social participation (inclusion and exclusion).

Wilfried Hosemann, Bamberg (November 2004)

Systemically oriented social workers do not look to change people; instead they shape and reflect on social relationships in such a way that a client's system and other systems use communication in an attempt to develop new goal-relevant social realities.

Wolfgang Geiling, Bamberg (November 2004)

1. Thinking and acting systemically means considering (social) phenomena not in isolation but in an attempt to understand them in their context and interdependency with other social phenomena. A system is an ordered unity as perceived by an observer, composed of elements that relate to one another in certain relationships.
2. Social work as a science is a "systemic science." Social work as a science has the task of describing, explaining and changing social problems. This only makes sense when it is done interdisciplinarily, from different perspectives and in reference to "systems," i.e. on the level of ordered unities that stand in relationship to one another.
3. Social work is a "systemic profession". Social work always takes place in relation to a person in their social environment. The "person-in-environment" paradigm is constitutive of professional social work. Social work is systemic - in a broader sense - or it is not social work.
4. In the explanation and description of social problems, it however makes sense not to restrict them to system theory approaches but to apply all relevant social science approaches.
5. Social work methods or interventions must also suit the particular problem and the respective field - it makes no sense to attempt to adapt the problems and the field to the methodical approach. It is therefore useful and necessary on the level of intervention to apply various forms of knowledge about such interventions and integrate, for example - depending on the task at hand - material assistance, information (i.e. legal advice), development of resources or social advocacy methods.
6. Systemic social work in the strict sense does not mean, therefore, the exclusive use of systemic models for describing and explaining social problems or phenomena or the use of systemic methods or forms of intervention in professional practice.

It seems to me, therefore, to make sense to speak of "systemic social work" in a stricter sense only if in the integration of different descriptive, explanatory, value and intervention models a "systemic point of departure" is constitutive. This would include:

- circularity,
- a focus on finding solutions,
- respect and a lack of respect,
- a sensibility to context,
- (social) constructionism
- an interest in understanding and changing patterns of emotion, thinking, and acting of individuals, families, teams, organisations...

Ulrich Pfeifer-Schaupp, Freiburg (October 2004)

Social work applies systemic theories, methods and attitudes to the entire working field of social work. The systemic point of view focusses on, among other things:

- context: human behaviour can, depending on the context and perspective, be examined and understood differently. Systemic social work is aware of the possibilities inherent in multiple perspectives and works with them.
- mandates: systemic social work is oriented on the mandates of all stakeholders (clients, funding bodies, society, etc.) and gives them a central role.
- resources: the ever-present strengths and abilities of people and the value inherent in even the most difficult situation are drawn upon and used methodically as a central element of all work. Systemic social work foregrounds resources.
- solutions and the future: possible future solutions are decisive (as opposed to problems and their causes in the past). Systemic social work considers the client as an expert on the shape solutions should take.
- human autonomy and tenacity: Systemic social work is based on the dignity and independence of all people. They have the right and the ability to self-determination. The goal of systemic social work is to expand the options of all stakeholders.
- appreciation and respect: systemic social work considers all stakeholders to be equal partners, recognises them openly as equals and takes them seriously. It has the tools to apply this idea methodically.

Systemic concepts can be applied with great benefit in everyday working life:

- in working with clients (children, adolescents, adults and various groups, such as the elderly, the disabled, youth, the mentally or physically ill, drug users, convicts, the homeless),
- in one's own institution (with colleagues, in a team, with supervisors or staff),
- in working with partners (individuals, professions and institutions), and
- in communal as well as socio-political processes.

Social work has, due to the complexity of its object, always tended to be thought and practised systemically. Systemic social work takes into account this tendency and draws on it. It is in a position to make a decisive contribution to the professional self-confidence of social workers. Systemic social work consists of a series of (sometimes very different) concepts, models and approaches. A "school" of systemic social work does not exist, nor would it be desirable or suffice to meet systemic standards: a central aspect of systemic theory and practice is the possibility to choose, and this includes the possibility to choose between different forms of systemic thinking and practice. Social workers applying systemic concepts do not consider these to be exclusive of others. Instead they combine them with other theoretical and practical social work models: "There are always at least seven possibilities..."

Johannes Herwig-Lempp, Halle (October 2008)

Johannes Herwig-Lempp - Biography

In the early 1980s I studied social work in Bremen, then spent 10 years as a social worker working with drug users, psychiatric patients and in socio-pedagogical family support before I came to the Hochschule Merseburg (in eastern Germany, near Leipzig) to teach social work in 1998. My training in systemic therapy and counselling (in the late 1980s in Heidelberg) convinced me that this approach is ideally suited for social work, which for me was even then, "more" than "just" counselling. Since that time I have worked to introduce systemic approaches to the profession of social work. The first master's programme for systemic social work in Germany was developed in Merseburg, the first cohort studying from 2009-2011. In Merseburg, I have also organised three conferences on the "The diversity of systemic social work". I continue to work as a systemic supervisor and give trainings in systemic social work. I have published a volume on theories of drug addiction and one on systemic collegial team counselling as well as a number of articles on systemic social work and social work as a profession.

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