

Materialien 14

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Community Empowerment and Social Work. Perspectives for future commitment.

1. Community empowerment: definition and basic orientation

"Strengthening people", "promoting resources for successful coping with life", "developing individual and collective capacities for social change" - keywords like these refer to a concept of action that has become a fixed star in the sky of social work in recent years: *the empowerment concept*. Originally an import from equity- and justice-driven social movements (human-rights-movement of Black America; feminist, people-of-color and LGBTQ+ movement; self-help organization of people with handicaps), this concept is now one of the winners on the psychosocial ideas market. It has found its way into the reform debate in social pedagogy, psychotherapeutic work, health promotion and community psychology and has stimulated a vast variety of model projects. In literature there are many attempts to define the essentials of empowerment. The term empowerment today stands for all approaches in social practice that encourage people to discover their own strengths and help them to acquire agency, self-determination and autonomy. The aim of empowerment practice is to strengthen people's existing (albeit often buried) abilities and to foster resources that help them to shape their own journey through life as well as their local environment.

From this still general definition, it is one more step to determine what empowerment means in community development processes. Empowerment as an action-guiding principle of socio-spatial work means: encouraging and enabling people in local organizations, institutions and settings to collectively raise their voices, articulate their needs, discover their own resources and shape their living conditions according to their own interests. This definition makes clear: community empowerment formulates a counterpart to the top-down strategies of a proxy planning urban development policy. It is not (only) the expertise of urban planners, architects and social demographers that is required here. Building on old traditions of partisan political community work, the work is rather aimed at activating the coping resources of residents, encourage their commitment for social transformation and strengthen their productive capacity to become assets in shaping their own environmental reality (on the history and concept development of community empowerment, see Herriger 2022; 2024).

2. Strengthening collective resources: empowerment work in urban spaces

The diagnoses of urban sociology are clear: there is talk of a "fragmented urban society", a "radicalizing segregation within and between cities and communities" is diagnosed, "the polarization of ethnic colonies" and "the dystopia of urban spaces" are discovered (Davis

1990; Minieri/Mondros 2023; Stoecker 2022). What these new urban sociological studies have in common is the finding that cities are divided: the rift runs right through the middle of the city. At its center we find the "first city", the city center clad in high-gloss architecture, in which trade and services of the economic global players, consumption and cultural representation are located. And on the outskirts of the city we find districts and neighborhoods of highly vulnerable population groups in precarious living conditions, the places of residential segregation, in which social problems are paramount and the "exclusionary confinement" of its residents is often only managed in an oppressive supervisory and controlling manner.

Current studies on urban structural processes of polarization and division provide a convincing diagnosis of the present. And yet: they are characterized by a one-sidedness that must be criticized. In many passages, these analyses of urban realities are characterized by *a deficit view of places and people*. Negative scenarios of decay, of the desolation of the infrastructural and cultural landscape, of the local accumulation of poverty and marginalization determine the researcher's view of "the divided city". However, residents whose living environments are affected by processes of segregation are rarely perceived as acting subjects. They rather are described as defenseless victims of seemingly overpowering distortions of structural macromilieus. Their living conditions and experiences, their biographical histories, their social networks and everyday skills thus all too often appear solely as deficits, shortcomings and inadequacies. The consequence of this deficit view, however, is that the voice and the agency of residents, their vitality and their existing skills for coping with life are lost from view.

Work from the empowerment perspective has drawn attention to this blind spot on the scientific retina. "Community empowerment" (Christens 2019; 2024) follows an explicitly formulated resource perspective - albeit without losing sight of the "harsh reality" of disadvantaged and marginalizing living conditions in troubled urban districts. These studies document the rediscovery of "the milieu" (neighborhood ties and local connectedness) as an intermediary instance that mediates between the level of urban macro structures on the one hand and the level of experience and action of the resident population on the other. The focus here is on the specific patterns of resources and restrictions for actively shaping life in the neighborhood; the horizon of perception opens up to the locally specific collective practices of the residents themselves in coping with everyday life. The concept of community empowerment thus breaks with the guiding narrative of deficit, weaknesses and dependencies. Here, people are no longer perceived (solely and exclusively) from a victim's perspective. Quite the opposite: they are perceived in their role of competent actors who have the ability to actively shape their everyday lives by pooling collective forces. Empowerment work thus aims to promote local collective resources, i.e. to promote the capacity for action and community development, which emerge and grow in the cooperative action of house communities, neighborhoods, residents' assemblies and local action groups (for the findings of community psychology in the USA and in Germany, see Claus-Ehlers 2021 and Behzadi 2023). The agenda of current urban sociology projects demonstrates two main action strategies:

Networking, social support, "embedding": Community empowerment sparks a new sense of connectedness. It aims to create new networks and communities of belonging - especially in places where the resignation, demoralization and discouragement of residents sabotage an autonomous process of self-organization. In a variety of small actions, which can be the first modest steps towards improving the local quality of life, community empowerment

strategies bring together people with similar concerns, encourage them, provide assistance in addressing concerns and supports people in gaining access to community power. Connected to one another the residents develop a sense of belonging and solidarity across generational and ethnic barriers ("embedding"), they experience mutual emotional and practical support in dealing with everyday issues, they develop their own roles of responsibility and thus become active players in community decision making.

Political capability, organization of interests, political intervention: Community empowerment also aims to "encourage people to stand up" and to affirm the political capability of residents. Political capability comprises *two components: organizational capacity and conflict resolution capacity*. In this context, the capacity to organize means the ability of residents to autonomously mediate and reconcile the diverse particular needs and interests of different (and often conflicting) resident groups and thus outline workable formulas of compromise ("interest mediation"). Organization capacity further comprises the ability to open doors and to "feed" collective interests into the channels of political and administrative decision making, it means bureaucratic competence in dealing with the language, procedures, regulations and formal requirements of the political-administrative system as well as the ability to use media self-representation. Conflict resolution capacity on the other hand means demanding participation in political decision-making processes, assuring oneself of powerful allies in politics, associations and civil society and thus asserting the power of resistance. On this often initially uncertain path to political self-determination, which is paved with many stumbling blocks, people leave the well-trodden paths of learned helplessness. Collectively they gain confidence, take control and responsibility in community development and gradually become a powerful actor on the local public stage.

3. Profiles of resource-oriented professionalism in the social space

Community-based social work (community outreach work), which is located in these dynamic processes of urban structural transformation, requires a specific set of skills. Two central competencies should be named here: (1) Probably the most important element in this competence setting is the ability of social work professionals to be "intermediary bridge builders". On the one hand, it is their task to strengthen the self-organization of the residents, to bundle the divergent particular needs and interests of population groups of different ages, religions and ethnic backgrounds into a common voice and to feed the local visions, project ideas and development perspectives into the channels of administrative and political decision-making. On the other hand, it is their task to gain recognition from the administration, local politics and the private sector as a qualified professional partner and, in this role, to open up 'resonance spaces' for the concerns of the residents so that their voices can be heard (intersectional moderation; dialog management). (2) A second element that should not be missing from the skill set of community social workers is a specific "urban space diagnostic competence". Resource-oriented social work requires a particular sensitivity to the changing needs, interests and (hidden) resources of the residents. What is required here is small-scale social reporting which, through the systematic use of instruments for needs and resource diagnostics, provides a constantly updated knowledge base for educational and political action (cartography of social space; urban space diagnostics). Without claiming to be exhaustive, we can name further elements of the intermediary professionalism described here: a good dose of pedagogical imagination; negotiat-

ing skills in cooperation with housing developers, architects, urban planners, private investors and the moderation of conflicting interests; networking skills in instigating civic engagement and self-organization; wise advice in matters of strategy selection, the search for supporters and conducive alliances; and, last but not least, constantly encouraging residents in setting up diverse and colorful forms of participation and involvement. Overall, this results in a highly demanding profile of professional qualifications, skills and methodological abilities (for more details on social work professionalism see Brown/Stalker 2023; Craig 2017; Muia/Phillips 2023). Different roles are mixed here:

- "Problem sensor": Diagnosis of neighborhood-related structural problems and problem exacerbations.
- "Resource diagnostician": Seismograph for (still buried or unused) talents, strengths and skills of residents..
- "Organizational helper": Start-up, financial and organizational support for residents' activities and self-organization.
- "Door opener": Strategic advice and legal representation of residents in accessing local administration, politics and business.
- "Dialogue manager": Moderation of communication processes at the intersection between private life, administration and public market.
- "Conflict mediator": Mediation in situations of conflict within the residents and reconciliation of particular interests.

In fulfilling these roles, activating community work strengthens local identity and belonging, increases the social capital of residents and encourages people to represent their neighborhood-related concerns self-confidently in the public sphere.

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(text submitted for publication: 26.02. 2024)