

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN SOCIAL WORK

Social work as a profession and discipline is committed to social change and development. There is a long tradition of innovation in social work: changing social problems demand for new and novel approaches and services. Social innovation in social work is characterized by ethical foundation, cooperation between practice and science, cooperation with civil society, organizational framework and a high sensibility for innovative risks.

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INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of the welfare state and promoted by social legislation a new professional sector developed and became known as social work. Social work – understood as a skillfully provided service framed by the welfare state – was without precedent, spread rapidly and opened up new fields of action and thus was an innovation in itself.

The innovative power of social work has also significantly stimulated societal innovations as social planning, family counselling, prevention, or the paradigm shift from integration to inclusion.

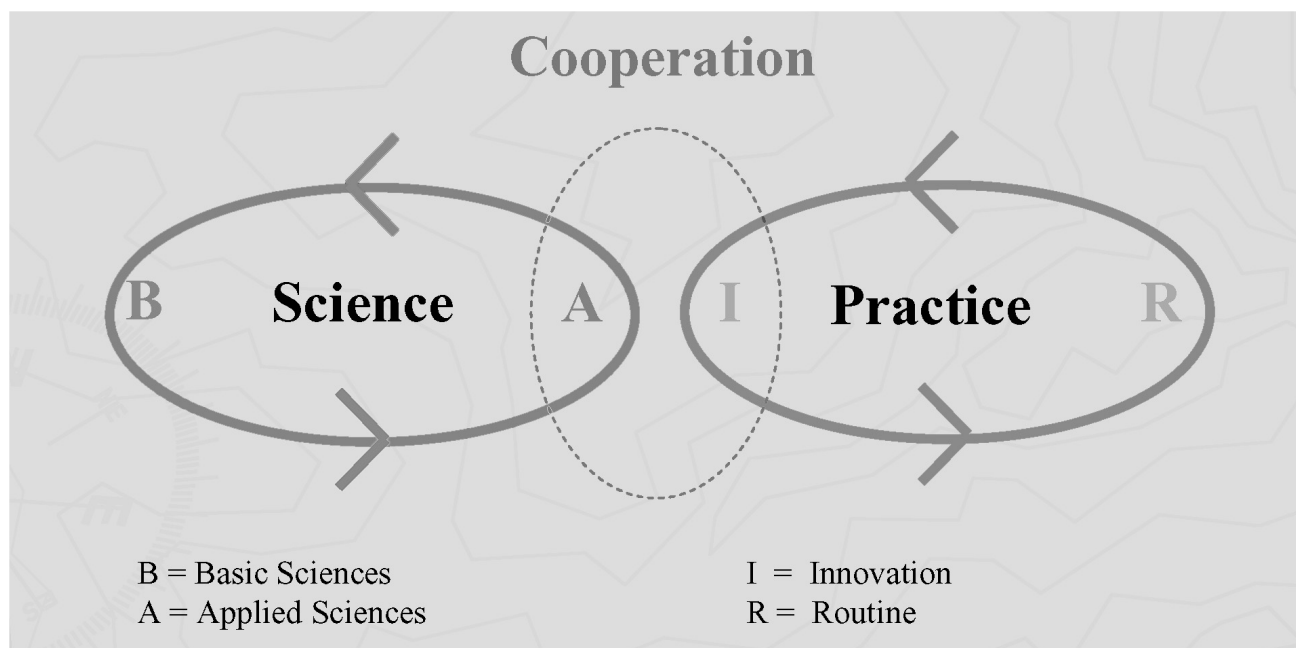
Social work is a “profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work” [1]. Social work has proven its innovative potential time and again (e. g. school social work, supported education and employment for persons with cognitive disabilities or other handicaps, women’s shelters, crisis intervention services). The innovative power of social work has also significantly stimulated societal innovations as social planning, family counselling, prevention, or the paradigm shift from integration to inclusion.

General characteristics of social innovation include complexity, riskiness, reflexivity, unpredictability and limited

controllability, diversity and heterogeneity of the involved parties, non-linear patterns as well as a high degree of context and interaction dependency. Innovations in social work show further important characteristics, which will be described below. We consider innovation in social work as a variant of social innovation that is characterized by the participation of social work professionals in the innovation process. In order to mark the difference between social innovation and innovation in social work, we will speak of innovation in social work when it comes to novel developments in social work.

ETHICAL FOUNDATION

As a welfare profession, social work is value-driven. Innovations in social work can arise if central social values such as social justice, social integration, participation, etc. are not adequately met. Innovative strength in the social sphere and, as a consequence, social cohesion and the well-being of individuals, depend on investments that seek to bridge the gap between values and their realization. This ethical foundation enables offers to eligible target populations, e.g. the equalization of disadvantages for people with a disability, which may not be justified on economic grounds. Normative framing has also a limiting effect, since the type and scope of services offered must not exceed a justified need. The guiding idea behind the development of new services is to meet a given need in the most qualified, effective, differentiated, or tailored way possible as to secure a regionally appropriate provision of social services.



Cooperation between science and practice

COOPERATION BETWEEN SCIENCE AND PRACTICE

The relation between profession and scientific discipline is another guiding motive of social work that has a strong impact on the innovation topic. In technological fields, close links between science and practice are widespread. Suitable forms of social research also support innovation in the social system. Science and practice are structurally related and work together in cycles, but represent distinct social systems [2].

The mediation and original combination of knowledge may be regarded as a central defining feature of innovation, alongside the recombination of social practices. In science-practice cooperation different types of knowledge (e.g. implicit, narrative, explicit) are combined and new, hybrid forms of knowledge emerge.

LEVELS

Nicolls and Murdock [3] suggest that differences in the positioning of the social aspect of innovations are analyzed by taking into account the actors involved in the process. An analytic framework proposed to do this is the well-known triad including a social macro, meso and micro level, which can be extended by a nano level:

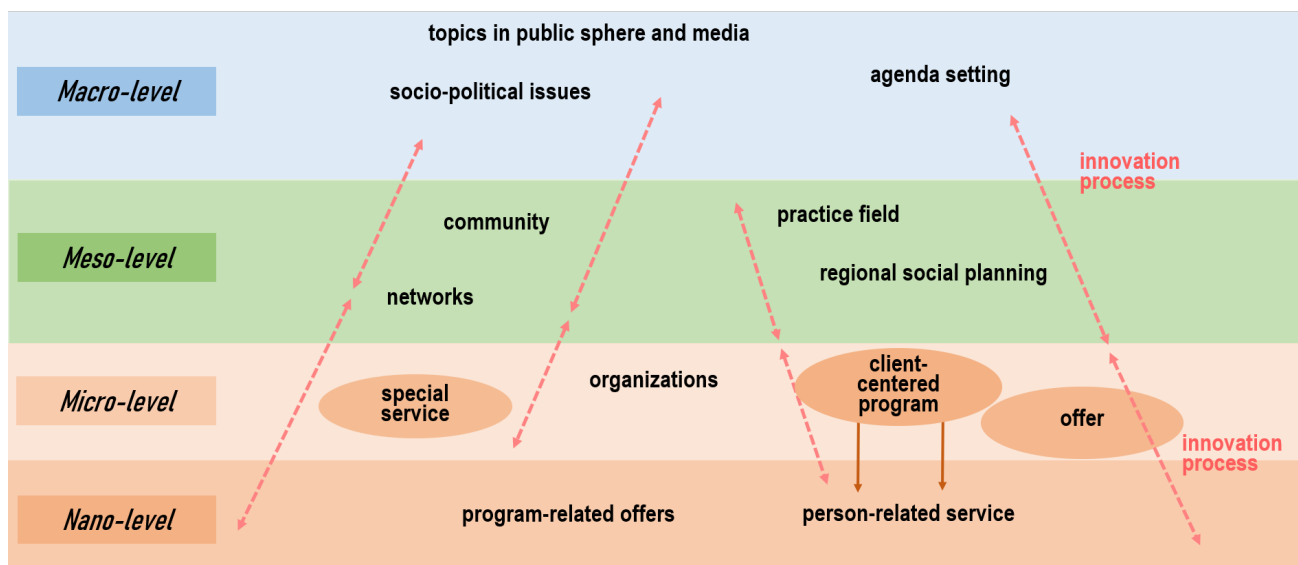
- **Macro-level:** Innovations on this level are socio-politically intended changes involving social work (e.g. drug policy in Switzerland). Linking micro- or meso-social initiatives with political agenda-setting can lead to profound changes in the field of practice, the community or to restructuring of the national system of social care.

- **Meso-level:** Networking and coordination can lead to the establishment of new practices in the regional context and to changes in the social planning (e.g. participative neighbourhood development).
- **Micro-level:** Niches that offer freedom to test radical innovations and the area in which individual client-centered projects and services are created. Innovations at the organizational level can also be located here (e.g. new forms of housing for ageing people with cognitive disabilities).
- **Nano-level:** Program-related offers and the interactive creation of person-related social services are subjects of the nano level. Social work services are essentially provided in personal processes, with a simultaneity of production and consumption. The desired results cannot be achieved without the participation of service users. This becomes clear, for example, in blended counselling.

The levels are interconnected: Processes on one level can influence or trigger processes on another level depending on context conditions, in both directions. If so, a time lag is to be expected in the sense that for example, a claim made by civil society actors increases the pressure on institutions to make changes to their target-group-related offerings.

CIVIL SOCIETY, COOPERATION WITH NON-PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

The role of civil society actors and the cooperation of social work professionals with voluntary and non-professional forces is also crucial. Andion et al [4] examined which actors mobilize around a social problem and mapped public arenas.



Analytical framework for analyzing the interrelations between different levels

The authors underline that in order to understand the dynamics of social innovation, different levels of analysis must be combined. In addition, medium-term effects have to be considered to adequately map and analyze social innovation (in conjunction with social work), as it is more than the co-design and improvement of public services: It has a high political significance in the sense that social problems mostly have both, an individual and a structural dimension, which implies that innovations in social work not only aim at a better, more effective and precise addressing of a social problem, but at best also have an impact on the causes of the issue.

ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

On the one hand, innovation in social work is linked to changing social and political processes, and on the other hand mostly takes place in institutionalized contexts of organizations. These organizations are embedded in country-specific and regional structures of social care and social policy. While some may be integrated into public administration financed by public subsidies, others operate within the framework of non-profit organizations financed by donations or other private funds. The division of labor and forms of cooperation between professional and non-professional actors also vary from country to country.

The innovativeness of organizations may be limited due to tendencies towards self-preservation. In principle, however, innovation is possible in any organizational context, provided that the specific constellations (e.g. with regard to the actors within the organization or in the political context) and influencing factors (favorable conditions, hindering factors) [5] are taken into account in shaping the innovation process.

RISKS

Since social work services often address vulnerable groups, risks of negative effects on the safety or the quality of the user's lives arise. This imposes special limits and a considerable sensitivity to taking innovative risks in the social sector. However, maintaining the status quo or refraining from innovative developments can also be a risk or a disadvantage for those affected. Secondly, if risks for users cannot be ruled out, ethical considerations as well as appropriate phasing (e.g. establishment of a model phase, test phase) and development controls increase their manageability. However, there are also other risk areas: The logic of accountability and the fact that social work usually does not generate its own economic returns also requires a sensible approach to financial risks. Explicit risk capital (e.g. by foundations) can be seen as a solution to cushion innovative failure.

RESEARCH

Innovation in social work must be considered a hitherto scarcely researched subject. In methodological terms, innovation is a rather unspecific social work research subject. However, some approaches such as explorative and single case studies, multi-method designs, participatory, cooperative, and learning approaches are particularly suited to the characteristics and the current state of innovation research in social work. Since social work ultimately aims to support self-determined life conduct, the benefits, use and role of users require special attention. User research and user-led research provide points of reference in this respect. The consideration and empirical investigation of innovation in social work is so far mostly related to projects and processes mainly situated on a microsocial level. Empirical

work in the future should turn more towards the influence of different governance models on social innovation and on innovation in social work. In addition, it should concentrate beyond development on implementation, impact and diffusion [6] and thereby capture medium-term impacts on the entire social system.

CONCLUSION

The Vienna Declaration assumes that the most urgent and important innovations of the 21st century will take place in the social sphere. Social work undoubtedly contributes to innovation in the sense of the declaration by productively addressing the challenges of new social problems, changes in the needs of its target groups and the opportunities offered by new empirical findings. Innovation in social work is therefore both an object of innovation research and a methodical approach, i.e. a bridging concept between science, professional practice, service users as well as other interest groups around a social problem.

The melioristic approach to improving social coexistence is inherent in both social work and the concept of innovation. This should be reflected not only in the efforts of stakeholders to address social needs in a more qualified, differentiated and appropriate way, but also in their commitment to a more participatory, equitable society.

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