Defining Social Pedagogy: Historical, Theoretical and Practical Considerations

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Abstract

This paper deals with the problem of ambiguity in relation to the term social pedagogy. It portrays a picture with multiple theoretical drivers, including historical, epistemological and professional. The aim is to improve our understanding of the multifaceted nature of social pedagogy—a topical and complex issue. Both distinguishing and common denominators associated with different schools of thought are considered. The analysis shows that building a social pedagogical theory usually deals with the tension between a person's autonomy and modern society's requirements in the process of socialisation, and that social pedagogical theory is often being applied to alleviate social ills through education. Social pedagogy has been conceptualised as a science (a field of research and theory building), as a science-based occupational system of practices (a field of professional practice) and as a system of corresponding professional education (discipline).

Keywords: Social pedagogy, theory of education, theory of social work, professional education, professional practice

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Introduction

Due to the complexity of the concept, it is rather difficult to generalise about social pedagogy. The term itself is commonly used with several meanings that are in many ways related, but it is also used with other distinct meanings. On the one hand, the term has been used to express a particular tradition of pedagogic thought and action and, on the other hand, it refers to a branch of research and an academic discipline connected with a field of professional applications, in the sense either of one profession or of several social
and educational professions. This article aims for clarification of this conceptual variation. Special attention is paid to the origins and development of the field from the point of view of social history and the history of ideas, as well as from the perspective of different schools of thought and distinct professional applications.

Historical considerations
Some idea-historical and socio-historical starting points

As a tradition of pedagogic thought and action, social pedagogy is seen to originate historically from the discrepancy between individual autonomy and the requirements that modern society imposes upon a person, especially of the younger generation (Reyer, 2002; Dollinger, 2006). Social pedagogy is an attempt to deal with this discrepancy through education in theory and practice. It is a pedagogical reaction to the ‘youth question’ which sprang up along with the changes in societal structures through modernisation (Mollenhauer, 1959, 1964). From this point of view, the concept refers to a general principle of organising education in modern society. Initially, it was not about professional social care or social work, as the prevalent standpoint tends to be.

As far as we know, the concept of social pedagogy first came into use in Germany in the 1840s (Müller and Kronen, 2010). But the idea is older than the term. There is a good reason to discuss the pre-conceptual era of social pedagogy. From the point of view of the history of ideas, social pedagogical thought is closely connected with the time of great changes in European spiritual life during the transition from the Middle to the New Ages in the sixteenth century. The fatalistic understanding of history was replaced, step by step, by a new understanding based on the concept of ‘active man’. People started to understand that social ills cannot be cured by themselves, and that people are responsible for curing them. Two kinds of strategies were developed: political and pedagogical.

Since Plato and Aristotle, it was clear that social and cultural developments were significantly dependent upon education in society. In the social and philosophical writings of the great ancient Greek philosophers, ethical, political and pedagogical issues were considered together as a whole (Hämäläinen, 2012a). This understanding was a constitutive element of social pedagogical thought, in which attention was paid to fighting social problems and promoting social well-being through education. While political strategies were aiming at social progress through development of legislation, political institutions and societal structures, pedagogical strategies were oriented to the processes of education and human development.

The question of social misery did not really touch the great ancient philosophers, and they did not pay attention to finding opportunities to alleviate
poverty and other social problems through education. Therefore, the great Greek philosophers can hardly be called representatives of the idea of social pedagogy, although they illuminated the importance of education in social and cultural development. On the contrary, some other great educationists can be mentioned as trailblazers of the idea of social pedagogy in the pre-conceptual era, such as Juan Luis Vives in Spain, the Czech educationist Johann Amos Comenius and the Swiss, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who saw education as an important means to prevent social distress, and who developed his theory of education on this basis.

From the socio-historical point of view, the origins of social pedagogy as the ‘youth question’ were closely connected with the ‘social question’ brought about by the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, which broke down the social structures of the classical class society and caused mass poverty and other kinds of social problems (e.g. Mollenhauer, 1959). New social problems caused by modernisation were faced through education and defined educational problems.

In Germany, the concept of social pedagogy was integrated into social care and social work in the 1920s, especially into child and youth welfare, including non-formal youth education (e.g. Dollinger, 2006). Towards the end of the Second World War, this use of the concept became common in many other countries, each with different kinds of national particularities which were connected to country-specific welfare system characteristics (e.g. Lorenz, 2008). Social pedagogy became a concept for professional activities.

**Taking shape as a professional system and educational activity**

The early forms of social education manifested the idea of social pedagogy in which social ills are met by educational tools in theory and practice. Over the course of time, society has become more and more complicated in terms of modernisation and pluralism. In many countries, social pedagogy has been developed as a particular professional system dealing with people’s social and educational needs. In today’s debate, it is common that social pedagogy is considered as a particular professional field like ‘a member of the social professions’, ‘a method’, ‘a paradigm’, ‘a set of social policy institutions’ (Lorenz, 2008, p. 625) and ‘citizenship bildung’ (Eriksson, 2013, p. 14). The term is externalised both in the modern welfare system and in formal and non-formal contexts of education.

Social pedagogy has been developed as a theory of citizenship education in general and, in particular, as a form of special education and a system of social professions dealing with people’s special social needs. In this sense, there are reasons to discuss two main developmental lines of social pedagogy: a line of social care and welfare activities and a line of civil education (Hämäläinen, 2012b). As a professional system, social pedagogy operates in both the social and the educational sectors and on their border.
Early social pedagogical theory building was closely connected with philosophical anthropology. After the Second World War, and especially since the 1960s, the theory of social pedagogy has been increasingly developed on the basis of empirical social research, and empirical knowledge has played an expanding role. Two turns have been identified in the development of pedagogical thought in the 1960s, ‘a realistic’ and ‘an emancipative’ (Thiersch, 1989, pp. 1117–18). Social pedagogy has also been shaped by this trend. The traditional theory building based on a questioning of philosophical anthropology gave way to sociological orientation based on empiric social analyses and social criticism.

In general, social pedagogy originates from the tension between the older and younger generations in the modernising society. Each period of history and every particular social order, generation by generation, have their special challenges. The more complicated society becomes due to modernisation, the more fragmented socialisation becomes, the more common social exclusion is and the more difficult it is to organise the relationship between generations in society in terms of education. From the outset, social pedagogy has been linked, both as an idea and as practical action, to those educational challenges which come from social disintegration, especially the disintegration of socialisation. A large number of educational institutions—actually versatile and diverse systems of education—have been established in every modern society for this purpose and by using the concept of social pedagogy in some countries.

In the midst of country-specific multiplicity

Social pedagogy expresses itself in different national traditions shaped by country-specific social, political, economic and cultural conditions. As a professional system and a paradigm of social professionalism, it has been strongly influenced by socio-political infrastructures (e.g. Lorenz, 2008). Since social pedagogy came into existence as a concept, it has tended to discuss and conceptualise education primarily in reference to societal life, welfare and culture. It has been connected with different understandings of the preconditions for a good society, social development and social well-being, and has been reflected differently in different social orders, political systems and cultural structures.

Over the course of time, social pedagogical thought has taken shape in different ways in individual countries and cultural and language areas. Even so, there are very few comparative studies of this diversity (Kornbeck and Rosendal Jensen, 2009). Manifesting in different national traditions, social pedagogical theory building cannot be reduced to any particular way of thinking, but must be considered through idiographic approaches aimed at understanding the special nature of individual traditions.
Social pedagogical thought has derived much from general pedagogy. Many of those who have developed the theory of social pedagogy were theorists of education in general, not only specialists in social pedagogy. Due to this, a fundamental question that arises is how social pedagogy relates to general theories of education, and how it may be distinguished from pedagogy in general. This is not only the case in Germany but also, for example, in the Romance social pedagogical tradition (e.g. Ucar, 2011). Actually, many scholars in different countries have worked with the concept and theory of social pedagogy while building on the general theory of education and contributing to the development of the science of education in its broadest sense.

In Sweden, a country whose social order is based on the Nordic welfare model, social pedagogy has been developed largely in the context of the professional social care system (Eriksson, 2010). This is also the state of affairs in other Scandinavian countries, Finland (Hämäläinen, 2011), Denmark (Madsen, 2006) and Norway (Gjertsen, 2010), whereas in Spain, primarily for historical reasons, social pedagogy has developed in terms of community action, self-help and popular education — historically in touch with the resistance movement in Franco’s reign (López-Blasco, 1998). The Polish tradition has been strongly influenced by patriotic movements (Deller Brainerd, 2001), whereas the Czech-Slovak tradition, influenced strongly by German scholars, has been developed more as a pedagogic-rational response to the social problems of modern society (Hronkóva, 2005). All country-specific traditions are fundamentally intertwined with national histories and features of their social order.

Social pedagogy in the English-speaking parts of the world

The concept of social pedagogy is very new in the English-speaking context and there is no real theory tradition based on it (Cameron and Moss, 2011). Social pedagogy has been introduced only recently by authors who are not native speakers of English, for example, dealing with the concept of social pedagogy from the point of view of childcare and youth work (Coussée et al., 2010; Storø, 2013), social work (Hämäläinen, 2003) and community development (Eriksson, 2010). Some English-written descriptions of country-specific traditions of social pedagogy offer inspiring views on current challenges of social professions in theory and practice. One example is the contribution of a survey of Polish tradition to social development, community mobilisation and the conceptualisation of social work as an integrated and comprehensive system of care (Deller Brainerd, 2001). Another example is a description of the Finnish tradition in which social pedagogy has been developed as an academic discipline contributing broadly to different professional fields (Hämäläinen, 2011). Overall, there are only a few analyses written into English by non-native English speakers,
but they are increasing aspirations by English speakers to develop the concept themselves.

Recently, a significant interest in the concept of social pedagogy has arisen in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. In this movement, social pedagogy has been considered particularly as a concept referring to communication skills in education, especially childcare and youth education (Petrie, 2011; Cameron and Moss, 2011). The debate on the nature of social pedagogy has partly been focused on children’s residential care (e.g. Cameron et al., 2011), but there have also been attempts to develop applications in other fields of work with children, young people and families. Attention is paid to opportunities for improving the working methodology through ‘a holistic personal approach’ (Petrie et al., 2009). Social pedagogy is viewed as a paradigm or a framework for improving children’s everyday activities (Cameron et al., 2011) and for dealing with children’s developmental risks (Milligan, 2011) in residential care. There are aspirations (Hatton, 2013) to move the discussion of social pedagogy beyond its focus on residential child-care services by looking at its potential for adaptation also within older persons’ services, youth work and community development. In Scotland (Smith, 2012), social pedagogy has also been developed as a conceptual framework for social care and social welfare work in a broader sense.

From the English-speaking perspective, it is important to allow room for country-specific understandings and to highlight the point that social pedagogy is not a product which can be exported from one country to another, as Petrie and Cameron (2009) have emphasised. Societies are different, as are the preconditions, needs and opportunities for development of social pedagogy as a discipline and educational practice. Representatives of social pedagogy in different countries can learn from each other, but the country-specific nature of social pedagogy must be recognised. On this basis, a special English-speaking tradition of social pedagogy—or even several traditions—can be developed. Instead of country-specific and cultural isolation, there is a need for interaction with different country-specific traditions. There are also reasons for identifying common denominators within the diversity.

Theoretical considerations

Theoretical classifications and conceptualisations

The concept of social pedagogy is somehow ‘difficult to catch’ (Eriksson and Markström, 2000). It is questionable whether social pedagogy, in its ambiguity, can answer what exactly it is (Hamburger, 2003). From the very beginning, it has been difficult to clarify and justify, which has brought a theoretically deep and many-sided tradition of thought (Rauschenbach, 1991). Theoretical self-conception is still a fundamental challenge of social
pedagogy in all its applications, namely in the sense of a discipline and a branch of study, in theory building, as a field of research and in professional activities.

In the midst of diverse moral philosophies, concepts of Man and society, political interests and philosophies of science, the conception of social pedagogy varies along with the schools of thought of educational philosophy (e.g. Burbules and Raybeck, 2003). It gains benefits from social theories dealing with ethical, political and educational issues. There is no unanimity on the nature of social pedagogy, no universal definition, no common theory and no uniform establishment for practice procedures. This is not only about the diversity between national traditions; there are also significant theoretical disagreements within individual traditions. From the very beginning, diversity of thought has been a visible characteristic of social pedagogy.

The starting questions of pedagogic thought deal with philosophical anthropology: What is a human being by nature? What should he or she become? How can this be achieved in terms of education and human development (Hämäläinen, 2012a)? These questions can be applied to the development of both individuals and society. Social pedagogy asks what a human is, in the context of society, and how the relationship between individuals and society should be organised from the point of view of education. It deals with this relationship by primarily paying special attention to the social prerequisites for individual development and to opportunities to promote people’s growth into active citizenship—the ability to act socially and display social responsibility while rationally fulfilling personal interests as a member of society. In any case, views on social pedagogy also vary according to different theories of human nature and the dispensing of political favours.

On the one hand, social pedagogy is seen to be advantageous primarily as part of the theory of welfare and correspondingly aiming at promoting welfare; on the other hand, it is viewed as being rooted in the general theory of education and focused on the social prerequisites of human development. These two ways of thinking complete each other in theory and practice. There are good reasons for a definition which encompasses both theoretical aspects at once. It is important to notice that both aspects deal with human needs from the point of view of education and the preconditions for fulfilling them.

From the interviews of nine scholars from Germany and the Nordic countries, three ideal types of understanding of the nature of social pedagogy have been identified (Eriksson, 2013). The Adaptive Model is an expression of an individualistic orientation which aims at social integration or adaptation of individuals by applying treatment methods. The Mobilizing Model typifies dialogical collectivism which aims at social change and emancipation by mobilising people to improve unsatisfying living conditions through common action. The Democratic Model aims at strengthening social cohesion by promoting active citizenship through formation (Bildung). It is relatively easy to identify that these three models express different ideological
orientations in terms of concepts of Man and society, especially the nature of
the relationship between the individual and society.

With the problems in person–society relations as a focus area, social peda-
gogy has traditionally and necessarily dealt with questions of normality and
deviance. Even social exclusion has sometimes been viewed as a form of de-
viance because it expresses nonconformity from the socially defined common
standards of the normal course of life (Madsen, 2006). A special risk of social
pedagogy as a social system is, in theory and in practice, to narrow-mindedly
conceptualise the dysfunction of person–society relations as defects in
people, or as deviant behaviour which should be repaired, corrected or
healed by pedagogic means. Several theorists have cautioned about this
way of thinking, reminding that, from the outset, social pedagogical
thought has had a characteristic of social criticism, although there have also
been tendencies to integrate people into society through pedagogic repairs.

Social pedagogy is not a toolbox of pedagogic methods. It is, rather, a way
of thinking in which social and educational considerations are united. The
methods are not the point, but rather a particular concept of the individual
in which attention is paid to the social preconditions of human growth and
to the pedagogic opportunities for influence and help (Hämäläinen,
2003b). In this sense, social pedagogical thought means a certain perspective
on the individual and society and the relations between them. Correspond-
ingly, within the current debate in the UK, social pedagogy is introduced
by linking creativity, inclusion and social pedagogy to notions of power
(Hatton, 2013). Social pedagogical thought can also be classified from the
point of view of methods, such as community-based, activity-based and
experience-oriented. In general, social pedagogy does not have methods of
its own distinguished from pedagogical methods in general. Thus, the
general classifications of pedagogical methods are also suitable for social
pedagogy.

Sometimes, even relatively often, different kinds of non-pedagogic exter-
nal theories have been applied in social pedagogical theory building. A good
example is the use of Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action for
making an integrative description of the position, tasks and nature of social
pedagogy as a discipline within social and educational sciences, and as a pro-
fessional field dealing, through educational means, with troubles in person–
society relations (Rauschenbach, 1999). However, social pedagogical theory
building should not, on the whole, be called eclectic, though concepts, theor-
ies and methods of surrounding disciplines have been applied to its needs.
As an academic discipline, it fulfils the common criteria of an independent
science through its particular modes of questioning and through its tradition
of theory building (Hämäläinen, 2003a; Niemeyer, 2003).

There are significant intersectional subjects in social pedagogical theory
building, such as ethnicity, gender, class, dependencies, criminality and
poverty. The relationship between democracy and education plays an im-
portant role, especially from the point of view of political theory. Modern
social pedagogy aims at pedagogic innovations in connection with social ills in today’s society. It deals, from the pedagogic point of view, with interactions and juxtapositions between the theories of individualism and communality. The idea of individual growth into mature subjectivity and active citizenship as a morally responsible member of society consists of both of these. In this sense, the theory of ‘subject’ plays an important role in the modern self-conceptualisation of social pedagogy.

**Epistemological schools of thought**

An important theoretical device for the conceptualisation of social pedagogy is connected with differences between ontological, epistemological and axiological standpoints. In general, the same philosophies of science and epistemological schools of thought which have influence in social and educational sciences can be identified, also, in social pedagogy. The development of social pedagogy as a discipline, field of research and theory of education has been shaped by different epistemological schools of thought such as critical rationalism, analytical empiricism, phenomenology, hermeneutics and Critical Theory.

Philosophy of science is not a trivial matter. Different epistemological approaches have consequences in the systems of research, education and professional practice. The aims and contents of research, education and practice are essentially influenced by epistemological points. Even the legitimacy of the concept of social pedagogy is closely connected with epistemological argumentation (Mikser, 2006). The conceptualisation of social pedagogy as a science, and as a science-based system of education and professional activities, depends upon epistemological starting points. Different epistemological schools of thought provide very different answers. Theoretically, modern social pedagogy is seen to be thoroughly emancipative by nature. It is rather more about moral—ethical than technical—rational interests of knowledge, connecting with social—ethical and social—political questionings and values.

Any common grouping of the schools of thought found in the philosophy of education is also suitable for analysing the schools of thought of social pedagogy. In accordance with the classification of the trends of modern philosophy (Burbules and Raybeck, 2003), the theory of social pedagogy can be seen to branch out in prescriptive, analytical and critical schools of thought. Social pedagogical thought has been shaped by many great educationists and pedagogic movements. It has a number of classics but it is rather hard to canonise them due to the theoretical complexity and to the many different opinions of the field. Individual countries, as well as schools of thought, have their own favourites.
Practical considerations
Social pedagogy as professional theory and practice

From the occupational point of view, there are several different standpoints about the essence of social pedagogy as a particular occupational field. Its position as a professional system is connected with the welfare infrastructure of society (Lorenz, 2008). For example, there is a well-developed system of public welfare services in the Nordic countries and, due to this, social pedagogy has been viewed primarily as a concept dealing with diverse services in the social and educational sectors, whereas, in countries where the welfare infrastructure is less developed or organised in another way, perhaps through non-governmental organisations, social pedagogy is more rooted in civil society and less in the public system of services fixed by law.

In many respects, professional social pedagogy is diverse by nature in both theory and practice (Kornbeck and Rosendal Jensen, 2009). ‘A tension between academia and professional field’ has been identified (U´car, 2011, p. 135). In the last analysis, the varieties of professional social pedagogical practice are connected with the theoretical self-conception of social pedagogy. In some, the conceptualisation of social pedagogy is reduced to a field of re-socialisation; in others, to specific age groups or groups of social and psycho-social problems; in others, to particular educational methods; and in still others, to particular educational institutions.

This diversity is not easily managed conceptually. Social pedagogy might even be conceptualised to be identical to particular occupational fields such as youth work or residential care, but this kind of narrowing use of the concept is exceptional. A lifespan perspective seems to be included in the modern understanding (Kornbeck and Rosendal Jensen, 2011, 2012). In Sweden, for example, social pedagogy has been introduced, in terms of citizenship education, in the fields of both popular adult education (Eriksson, 2010a) and early education (Markström, 2010). Apart from the fact that ‘social pedagogy evolves and adapts to different national circumstances and histories’, as Petrie and Cameron (2009, p. 164) put it, there is a growing tendency for international collaboration, aiming at deeper understanding of the nature of social pedagogical theory and practice and identifying common denominators in the midst of diverse traditions. This is far beyond the philosophy of the best practices.

Professionally, social pedagogy aims for both social development and alleviation of social ills, in general, and for helping people in their everyday lives, in particular. Its explicit professional duty is seen to be to use education to prevent social exclusion, and the professional competencies needed for fulfilling this are pedagogical by nature (Madsen, 2006). Social pedagogy has been developed as a particular profession and as a discipline, a theoretical framework, a field of research and a branch of studies suitable for various social and educational professions. Thus, there are two forms of
professionalisation of social pedagogy, mono- and poly-professional systems. They do not categorically exclude each other but they have consequences for the organisation of professional education and for practice. In this respect, each individual country seems to have its own arrangement of details, even in the use of the professional title ‘social pedagogue’ (e.g. Kornbeck and Rosendal Jensen, 2009). There are also differences between countries in the views of the organisations in which social pedagogy as professional action takes place.

Social pedagogy and social work

In all countries where social pedagogy has taken place, the question about how it relates to social work has emerged. In general, three basic answers have been formulated (e.g. Merten, 1998). First, social pedagogy is seen as synonymous with social work. Second, it is viewed as a particular paradigm of social work. Third, it is conceptualised as an overlapping term in different professional fields, including social work. It is rather difficult to identify and compare the country-specific positions due to constantly changing professional boundaries and titles and because the key concepts are used in varying ways in different countries. There is no consensus, and it is rather unclear how social pedagogy and social work relate to each other in theory and practice. In Germany, the trend has long been to mix the concepts (e.g. Rauschenbach, 1999) but the opposite to this occurs in many other countries, such as in Finland (Hämäläinen, 2011), Sweden (Eriksson, 2013), Norway (Storø, 2013) and the UK (Cameron and Moss, 2011).

As an occupational sphere of activities, social pedagogy puts pedagogic principles into practice. Psychological theories and therapeutic approaches are widely applied in professional activities of social pedagogy. Dialogue and community seem to be common theoretical denominators that are often mentioned. Since Socrates, dialogue has been seen as a fundamental element of pedagogic action, whereas the importance of community in education and human development, as well as the idea of collective self-governing, have been emphasised as educational principles by many theorists of social pedagogy itself. Generally speaking, social pedagogical professionalism has gained many benefits from a variety of creatively directed, dialogue-oriented and community-based pedagogic theories and methods.

In the methodological development of professional activities, attention has been paid to both person-oriented and community-based approaches. On the one hand, the importance of ‘pedagogical relationship’ has been emphasised and, on the other hand, the idea of ‘education in, through and for community’ has been stressed. For example, in the Nordic countries—influenced by foreign models—social pedagogy has been viewed methodologically both as a community-based activity, in terms of ‘socio-cultural animation’ (Kurki, 2000) or ‘mobilization for collective development’ (Eriksson,
and as a more person-oriented pedagogic work in terms of ‘good rendezvous’ (Berglund, 2000). That is also the case in other countries: social pedagogy has been conceptualised, more or less, both as a person-oriented and as a community-based approach.

Modern social pedagogy has been called both a science and a professional activity, but it makes sense to say that it is not a science for any profession (Niemeyer, 2003). To be a science, it has to clarify permanently, through a philosophy of science, its basic questioning, subject scope and concepts. On the other hand, as a professional activity, it deals with topical issues. As an integrated social system consisting of science (research), education (discipline) and occupational activities (profession), social pedagogy has advanced furthest in Germany and Spain, where much attention has been paid to its epistemological basis and the relations between theory and practice. From a historical point of view, the term came into existence within the context of educational activities and without the connotations of professional social work.

As an approach of professional activities, social pedagogy has been developed as a ‘subject oriented’ paradigm of youth education (Scherr, 2010), as well as a professional application of educational theory based on critical hermeneutics, named an ‘everyday life oriented’ paradigm of social work (Thiersch, 2006). In both approaches, people’s self-determination, personal autonomy and emancipation are emphasised as the aims and principles of professional activities. Correspondingly, the social pedagogical orientation has been modelled around human growth and social interactions, ‘to enhance people’s wellbeing, provide learning opportunities, develop relationships and enable people to empower themselves’ (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011, p. 49).

Because social pedagogy came socio-historically into existence as a pedagogical reaction to the social questions of the nineteenth century, it still deals with this challenge. Social exclusion is today’s big social question. It is closely connected with the complexity of the modern high-tech information society in which, increasingly, people have problems fulfilling occupational expectations and managing their lives (Hämäläinen, 2009). In many countries, social pedagogy has been conceptualised as a potential intervention into the causes of young people’s educational failure and unemployment, and has been combined with the concept of activity policy.

As a modern social system, social pedagogy develops pedagogical means to prevent and alleviate the social ills caused by the processes and structures of today’s society. Professionally, this means that social pedagogy has to be able to adequately deal with the different kinds of social and psycho-social needs of today’s people. Depending on the country-specific characteristics of educational and welfare infrastructures, the professional activities—varying between countries—manifest themselves more or less regularly within the systems of popular education and social care (including social work), possibly also within the school system.
From this point of view, there is a need for specialisation in social pedagogical research, education and professional activities. Modern people suffer from different kinds of dependencies: intoxicants, mental illnesses, co-dependency and behavioural disorders. Many children and young people remain in need of protection because of neglect and abuse. These are typical fields of social pedagogical professionalism in today’s society. Regardless of the question as to whether the theoretical self-conception should be based primarily on a general theory of socialisation and should regard all people, or should be reduced to a field of special education dealing only with particular groups of people with special social and educational needs, all kinds of social and psycho-social problems which influence the everyday lives of people today will be met in the reality of social pedagogical practice.

Conclusions

The concept of social pedagogy is ambiguous, and the theoretical self-conception of social pedagogy is diverse. There have been many attempts at systematic conceptualisations from different perspectives. The term can be, and has been, used in different contexts and in different ways. From idea-historical and socio-historical points of view, some common denominators can be identified, especially the idea of the interconnection of social and educational affairs and the interest in opportunities to alleviate social ills through education. Social pedagogy has come into existence in the wake of modernisation, a reaction to the tendency towards breaking up socialisation and its consequences in terms of social ills. These are commonly viewed as pedagogic challenges.

Due to the lack of conceptual consistency, social pedagogy has not been developed as a coherent system of theory building, research, education and practice. The diversity of meanings and contexts related to the concept makes the theoretical self-conception of social pedagogy manifold and complex. There are several sub-trends in social pedagogical thinking connected with different philosophical, sociological, psychological and educational schools of thought. Epistemological considerations play a fundamental role therein.

In general, social pedagogy is a social system of modern society, consisting of subsystems of science (research), education (discipline) and occupational activities (professional work). As an individual science, social pedagogy is shaped by the same philosophies of science as all other social sciences. As a practically oriented social science, it is also influenced by different political ideologies and interests. Originally, the concept was about understanding education through its social nature, not about social professions. This way of using the term came much later.
As a pedagogic practice, social pedagogy is carried out both in the context of non-formal education in the sense of civil activities, and formal education in the sense of professional work with different client groups. Professional activities are organised in varying ways in different countries. The variety in form and content of social pedagogical professionalism is connected to different theoretical conceptions expressing dissimilar social and political theories, philosophies of science, moral philosophies and concepts of Man and society. Social pedagogy aims to promote people’s social integration, participation and active citizenship, as well as to alleviate social exclusion through education.

In general, social pedagogical theory building discusses education from the point of view of the relations between individuals and their social environments, by paying special attention to the processes of social integration and emancipation. It emphasises the importance of community in human development and considers education as an opportunity to provide social help for socially disadvantaged people. Special attention is also paid to the pedagogic meaning of people’s spontaneous common action within a self-governing community.

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