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How to carry out socio-spatial analyses – Research design and methods

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Abstract

In the German tradition of social work¹, the idea of a socio-spatial orientation (Sozialraumorientierung) can be regarded as a significant conceptual reference since the early 1990s. Starting with the seminal work “Pädagogik des Jugendraums” by Böhnisch/Münchmeier (1990), a variety of approaches around the concept of socio-spatial approaches were developed in theory and practice of social work.

The socio-spatial “key idea” is, that social work always “happens” within a spatial environment. The individual situation of a client can only be fully understood in the context of his/her everyday life within the surrounding local, national and international structures. Bearing a lot of resources and possibilities, as well as potential risks, problems or uncertainties, the nearer environment of the local neighbourhoods or regions can be regarded to be of central point of reference for social workers in all the different working fields (Spatscheck 2012)².

In the context of such an orientation, the analyses of socio-spatial settings are becoming important and helpful tools for getting an enlarged understanding of encompassing and user-related social diagnoses as well as of problem and resource analyses that are searching for a broader knowledge than individualising approaches (Spatscheck 2009). Therefore, socio-spatial analyses can be regarded as a helpful tool for everyday social workers that are looking for a broader understanding of the life situation of their target groups and their environment and want to integrate this perspective in their practical work.

Keywords

Social work, social space, methods

¹ In the German debate the term “Soziale Arbeit” (social work) is used as an umbrella term for “Sozialarbeit” (social work with adults) and “Sozialpädagogik” (social pedagogy with children and youth). The task of social work can be regarded as the “prevention and coping of social problems” (Engelke/Spatscheck/Borrmann 2009) or, more generally, to support citizens in their “leading of life” (Lebensführung) (Otto/Scherr/Ziegler 2010). In both senses, social work refers to the relationship between individuals and society and the possible conflicts and professional solutions within this relationship (Hamburger 2007, 14).

² Here, the territorialisation of social problems should be avoided. Not all social problems can be solved on a local neighbourhood level alone. Therefore, socio-spatial approaches need always to be guided by supporting national and international social and welfare policies.

The socio-spatial perspective in social work

Socio-spatial life-world analyses are rooted in the critical-hermeneutic paradigm of “everyday-” or “life-world orientation” (Alltags- und Lebensweltorientierung) that was especially formulated by Hans Thiersch (see Grunwald/ Thiersch 2009; Thiersch 2005; Engelke/ Borrman/ Spatscheck 2009, 427-443). In recognition of the work of Jürgen Habermas, he regards human development as process of interdependence between individual *life-worlds* and influences from public *systems*.

Predominantly Ulrich Deinet and Christian Reutlinger stress the idea of acquirement (Aneignung) as key process within personal development, informal education and Bildung (Deinet 2009a; 2009b; Deinet/ Reutlinger 2004). Alongside the idea of “spaces of possibility” (Möglichkeitsräume), they have developed hermeneutical concepts for social space analyses that aim to identify the dimensions of acquirement in socio-spatial settings.

Re-constructive and hermeneutic approaches to social spaces can help to understand individual life-world perspectives and processes of acquirement. Here, the concretely realised strategies of the everyday conduct of life (Lebensführung) and the individual coping strategies should get into a primary focus (Deinet 2009a, 56).

Individual strategies of the conduct of life are always developed within socio-spatial contexts. Social spaces are developed through everyday life practices within different system levels (Spatscheck 2009):

- Subjective and mental structures in the sense of individual perspectives of inhabitants that shape and design local spaces through their actions and processes of acquirement. Here, individual relationships of meaning, sense and action are the target of interest.
- Objective and material structures that get “concrete” in the structures of organisations, families and peer groups, the socio-economic and legal situation, the grade of participation in education, the accessibility of public and private infrastructure, qualities of habitat and architecture as well as effects of town and regional planning.

Social spaces are no absolute and static spaces; rather they are emerging as synthesis of perceptions, thoughts and actions in the context of structural influences (Deinet 2009a, Krisch 2009). The analysis of social spaces helps to identify and describe the multi-level interactive dynamics of spaces and can be used as a tool for social diagnosis and for the participatory clarification of situations and tasks (Spatscheck 2009).

Methods for Social Space Analyses

Especially Ulrich Deinet, Richard Krisch and Christian Reutlinger have collected and developed an encompassing variety of methods for the analysis of social spaces and individual life worlds (Deinet 2009a, 65-86; Krisch 2009, 97-109; Kessl/Reutlinger 2007). In the following passages, some of the most important tools are described.

- **Structured town walks (Stadtteilbegehungen):** Here, knowledge on social spaces is gained through personal impressions and perceptions from direct field experience (Deinet 2009a, 66; Krisch 2009, 97). The emphasis is laid less on direct contacts with inhabitants but on the observation of atmospheric aspects and qualities of spaces. Through orientating questions, defined routes and field notes, a higher density of observation can be gained. One special form are town walks with inhabitants that show their impressions on living in concrete spaces and can explore “hidden places and stories”. For an encompassing impression, it is important to discover spaces with different groups to learn from the different experiences.

- **Interviews with “Key persons” (Befragung von Schlüsselpersonen):** Local life-world experts are chosen along exemplified criteria and interviewed about their perceptions and knowledge about certain spaces (Deinet 2009a, 70; Krisch 2009, 97). Key persons are found in local contexts, they could be shopkeepers, youth workers, police staff, teachers, health care workers, older inhabitants, etc. who have special insights into social spaces. The interviews should last about 1 or 2 hours and are conducted as narrative interviews. To give the interviews more structure, it is possible to use a questionnaire. Interviews are often useful to gain deeper understanding after other methods have been applied before.
- **Needle method (Nadelmethode):** This method gives a visualisation of places that are frequented by inhabitants and is used to show their spatial qualities (Deinet 2009a, 72; Krisch 2009, 97). Inhabitants are asked to pin needles on prepared maps. They are encouraged to use certain colours for certain meanings, e.g. “I like to be here”, “dangerous”, “a place for old people”, etc. The results can be presented, compared and assessed in different groups. An interesting capability of this method is the visualisation and the direct activation of passers-by who they can be directly involved in the situation. For mobile use, needle-maps can be pinned on small boards of Styrofoam. Topographic software solutions like Google Maps or Google Earth offer new possibilities.
- **Peer group grids (Cliquenraster):** This method is used to produce grounded descriptions of youth cultures and peer groups in a certain region (Deinet 2009a, 79; Krisch 2009, 117). Along structured questions, young people are asked about the peer groups they know in a certain area and which attributes they give them. In the basic form, the categories are the name of the peer group, the number and age of the members, their outfit, their preferred music, their behaviour, their preferred places and possible conflicts around the group. After the collection of the data, the results can be discussed with young people and local experts. Using this explorative method, “tacit knowledge” from young people can be made visible. For young people it is often attractive to be asked as experts about youth cultures and scenes in their area. The method also needs a relationship of trust and transparency. As a variety, it might be interesting to collect data for grids on certain other groups or life milieus of adults.
- **Subjective or mental maps (Subjektive Landkarten):** Participants are encouraged to draw personal maps about their daily space of live (Deinet 2009a, 75; Krisch 2009, 110). These maps can be designed in open forms and their creators should be asked to show personal thoughts, meanings and perceptions about the space in the pictures. This method is a simplified form of narrative maps and is used to present and share subjective life worlds. The maps show the outreach into the space, the most important contents and the subjective assessment of meanings, sizes and distances. With additional questions, the researcher can find out more about the subjective experiences. Here, the map can be used as a reference for open interviews. This method can be applied in groups that are not too big and offer an atmosphere of mutual trust.
- **Autophotography (Autofotografie):** Inhabitants are asked to choose local places, to photograph them with digital or mobile cameras and to finally present, comment and interpret the pictures in specially designed environments (Deinet 2009a, 78; Krisch 2009, 115). The objects can be chosen along certain topics of interest like “everyday places”, “places of special interest”, “places that should be seen in a new light”, etc. The pictures show the different individual perspectives on social spaces and allow an exchange about the perception, design and condition of spaces and can be involved to support processes of participation and public debates on issues of certain groups, safety of infrastructure. For

good results, the group situation should not be too open and a presentation and discussion should be included.

- **Time budgets (Zeitbudgets):** Here, inhabitants are asked to visualize their daily activities in charts, tables or images in relation to the time they spend there (Deinet 2009a, 78; Krisch 2009, 134). The visual materials show the proportions of personal activities in a daily or weekly structure. They can be used for self-reflection on the proportions and contents of time use and, where shared in consent, help professionals to understand more about the life conditions, interests and needs of their target groups.
- **Interviews on organisations or institutions (Institutionenbefragungen):** Here, target groups are asked about their impressions and opinions on local organisations, infrastructure and networks of social welfare, education and health (Deinet 2009a, 84; Krisch 2009, 149). This leads to information about which institutions are known in which context, and which strengths and weaknesses these institutions have in local spatial contexts. The method can be enlarged with staff interviews. It would then be especially relevant to finally compare the different perspectives.
- **Some considerations on data collection and analysis:** To get an understanding about subjective and life-world oriented dimensions, it seems adequate to lay an emphasis on qualitative research and analysis methodologies. For an assessment of objective and structural life conditions, research designs of mixed methods or quantitative designs might be more appropriate.

For more encompassing information, the online-journal sozialraum.de describes all the mentioned research tools in a special section „Methodenkoffer“ and offers many basic texts and project descriptions around spatial thinking in social work and social sciences in German and, for some texts, in English language.

Important points of reference

Beginning from the critical-hermeneutical approach of the socio-spatial and life world oriented paradigm of social work / social pedagogy, the following cornerstones should be regarded when socio-spatial analyses are carried out (Spatscheck 2012):

a) A hermeneutic approach: Systematic understanding can be realised through a high grade of openness and a real interest to encounter and learn about the everyday life of participants. A hermeneutic approach helps to gain systematic and individual understanding and to find deeper personal and content-related knowledge about life-worlds.

b) Reflexivity: Effects of power, difference, social expectations, roles, values and norms are always materialised within socio-spatial contexts. From an ethical perspective it seems central to reflect the adequacy of mental models and actions of the professionals and the target groups. This should include the own person and their images and values as well as the concrete design of roles, mandates and missions. Reflection helps to identify and change inadequate attributions as well as to change illegitimate power relations.

c) Research orientation: Socio-spatial life-world analyses are methods of everyday practice research. The methods and techniques can be applied in working situations of everyday social work. To gain deeper understanding and systematic knowledge, the standards of empirical research should be applied in adequate forms that are integrated in the everyday processes of social work practice.

d) A developmental perspective: On the basis of socio-spatial life-world analyses, concepts and projects can be developed in a more grounded way. On this basis, the programs should aim to enlarge resources of the target groups for their daily conduct of life. Brought in relation to rights and needs, the results of social space analyses should be integrated in debates on which measures are the most suitable to help the affected persons to improve their concrete conditions of life.

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