Support Processes in the Housing First Approach – a Paradigm Shift in Social Work?

Susanne Gerull

Alice-Salomon-Hochschule Berlin, Germany

❯ **Abstract_** *In the context of Housing First, there is often talk of a paradigm shift in policy. In this article, I put the thesis up for debate, that Housing First also triggers a paradigm shift in social work through its basic principles: Social workers must adapt their professional understandings, especially in contact with their users. This also has an impact on other services for people experiencing homelessness via the debates in the field. The discourse about the paradigm shift described in the article has reached not only the professionals but also the users. Two model project evaluations from Berlin/Germany show that the latter also perceive the different approach in the support process and can also name it in interviews. In order to enforce these changes with the payers, social workers must actively exercise their so-called political mandate.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Housing First, Social Work*

Introduction

In the context of Housing First, there is often talk of a paradigm shift. Benjaminsen (2018, p.327), for example, speaks of a "paradigm shift… regarding the understanding of homelessness interventions in recent years as Housing First – early access to permanent housing in combination with intensive social support." Padgett et al. (2016, p.3) state with regard to the Pathways model (PHF) that the individual components of the approach would also have existed earlier, but "[t]he synergy of these four essential but disparate components endowed PHF with a unique purpose and approach to housing and services, one that required a sea change in the organizational culture of existing programs serving homeless"(Padgett et al., 2016, p.4).

Although Pathways/Sam Tsemberis, according to Pleace and Bretherton (2012, p.12), would insist that "there is only one form of service that can be called Housing First, which is the PHF model", more and more services are emerging that invoke the basic principles of Housing First. Even if they are not 100% faithful to the programme (e.g., by offering all flats centrally in one and the same building or no separation of housing and treatment), in my view, Housing First triggers a paradigm shift in social work through the basic principles specifically regarding the way the support process works with Housing First: Social workers have to reorientate themselves and, if necessary, rethink their understanding of their profession and realign it with the Housing First principles. If they succeed in doing so, this will be noticed by the users and also commented on, for example, in evaluations of the services.

I will examine this specific paradigm shift in social work in more detail below. If the perspective of this article is also a pan-European one, some arguments are substantiated using the example of social work in Germany. This is because the different national practices have not yet been considered systematically and in a differentiated way.

In this article, I will first present professional understandings of social work and then discuss Housing First principles that specifically relate to the support process there. Subsequently, both topics will be brought together, supported by the evaluation results of two Housing-First model projects in Berlin/Germany. The article ends with short conclusions regarding the thesis of a necessary paradigm shift in social work in the context of the Housing First approach.

Professional Understandings of Social Work

Social work has historically developed from the church-based care of the poor in the Middle Ages and, centuries later, public welfare. The history of its professionalisation is strongly linked to the commitment of the first women's movement at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century – and to women like Alice Salomon from Germany and Mary Richmond from the USA, who are considered pioneers of social work. At the end of the 1960s, social work also became an academic discipline with the introduction of corresponding courses of study.

A global definition of a modern understanding of social work has been developed by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014): "Social work is a practice-based 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. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing."

So, on the one hand, scientific knowledge is a prerequisite for professional action. Doel and Shardlow therefore name "research mindedness" (2005, p.185) as an important requirement for social workers. However, on the other hand, the above definition of the IFSW already makes it clear that in the practice of social work, classical purposive knowledge must be supplemented with the discursive knowledge of a 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983). That means, a constant theory-practice and practice-theory transfer must take place to be able to act professionally. Doing this, social work is constantly creating new models and methods, which in turn generate new expertise.

In this way, different professional understandings of social work have emerged in recent decades, some complementary, others irreconcilably opposed: There is a difference between my self-attribution as an 'advocate' and 'lobbyist' for socially disadvantaged and marginalised people or understanding myself as a 'facilitator' and 'co-producer' in the sense of a partner of my clients, users, and addressees. These understandings of roles give rise to many theories and approaches: In an anthology published by my university in Berlin/Germany on the professional under-standings of social work, 14 different approaches have been outlined (Völter et al., 2020). They are as diverse as 'Clinical Social Work' (diagnosis and treatment) and 'Social Work as a Human Rights Profession' (referring to human rights). In the field of homelessness, Zuffery (2017, p.147) proposes an intersectional approach that "is consistent with social work ethics and values about social change and working to upholding social justice and human rights." One condition for this is the so-called political mandate as a third mandate of social work. According to Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2008), the originator of the idea of a triple mandate, social workers have a third mandate in addition to the mandates of their clients (help) and society (control), which arises from the profession itself and is based on scientific knowledge and the professional ethos. The basis of a binding professional code is human rights (Staub-Bernasconi, 2008). Social work is thus "(also) a political profession"[1] (Gerull and Lehnert, 2020).

The initiative 'Grand Challenges for Social Work' (2020) also shows the importance of the role of social work in ending homelessness through 17 essays by authors from NGOs and universities, interest groups, and umbrella organisations. However, they also note that the system of assistance often does not take sufficient account of the needs of those affected. Using positive examples, several essays show the attitude of social workers needed to ensure successful and, above all, sustainable

---

[1] Own translation from German.

housing provision for people experiencing homelessness. Therefore, in the following, the Housing First principles are briefly presented in the context of the support process, to then come back to the paradigm shift necessary for this, which makes its implementation possible in the first place.

Housing First Principles in the Context of the Support Process

As a kind of guiding principle for the support process in the PHF, Tsemberis (2010, p.31) describes the necessary basic attitude of the staff: "It is crucial to establish reciprocal, trusting relationships in which clients are treated and respected, dignified individuals who deserve warmth and compassion. (…) Services are formulated and directed by a client's self-identified goals." The resulting attitude of the staff is one of questioning: "How can I help?" (Tsemberis, 2010, p.45). For the European region, Pleace (2016) has set out and elaborated the principles of Housing First established by PHF in a total of eight 'core principles' of Housing First. These were developed with the support of an advisory board, of which Tsemberis was a member.

According to this (Pleace, 2016, p.29-36), the core principles are:

1. Housing is a Human Right

2. Choice and Control for Service Users

3. Separation of Housing and Treatment

4. Recovery Orientation

5. Harm Reduction

6. Active Engagement without Coercion

7. Person-Centred Planning

8. Flexible Support for as Long as is Required

The eight core principles are not strictly distinct, they refer to each other and are even partly dependent on each other. For example, the reference to the human right to housing not only means that people experiencing homelessness do not have to earn this right, but also that users with mental illness or addiction do not have to undergo psychiatric treatment or be sober while in Housing First services (cf. Tsemberis, 2010).

The latter is closely linked to the accepting approach of 'harm reduction' and this in turn to the specific target group of Housing First, namely "clients [who] have either been unable to gain access to traditional services, or traditional services have not proven effective for them" (Tsemberis, 2010, p.45). In this context Pleace (2016, p.34) emphasises that "services requiring abstinence, or detoxification, do not work

well for many homeless people." The support of the professionals in general consists in actively pointing out alternatives and in the form of offers. This is not coercive and does not have negative consequences for the users if they do not make use of it. The support should therefore be appreciative, encouraging, and empowering, without sanctions or threats of sanctions. (Pleace, 2016). The services provided by Housing First are not standardised but are tailored to the respective users and their needs (Pleace, 2016). The eighth principle is based on the first, namely the human right to housing: Users who lose their housing, e.g., due to rent arrears, will continue to be supported by the Housing First offer if they so wish. However, a new offer of housing is also possible. (Pleace, 2016).

Housing First and Social Work Approaches

Housing First support should be provided in multi-professional teams (cf. Pleace, 2016). So social work is not solely responsible for the support process in Housing First services, but it is always a part of it (or at least it should be). In Germany, too, some Housing First teams work together in a combination of, for example, social workers, social assistants, and psychologists. A recommendation for the Housing First approach of the 'Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge' [German Association for Public and Private Welfare] also advocates "the use of multi-professional teams in which different professions, methodological approaches, skills and experiences complement each other"[2] (DV, 2022, p.8). Also, peers should be able to contribute their own perspectives and make alternative relationship offers (DV, 2022). This alone is a challenge, because, at least in Germany, multi-professional teams are not yet standard in social work. Due to the strong pillarisation of the help system, the responsibilities of the respective help offer are often very strictly regulated; for example, psychologists or medical staff cannot be financed without further ado in homeless care.

If multi-professional teams are formed despite these difficulties, the question of power often arises immediately. Since social workers are often at the bottom of the hierarchy, especially in the health care system, conflicts cannot be ruled out and are sometimes carried out on the backs of the users (cf. for Germany, Geißler-Piltz and Gerull, 2009). An even greater challenge for social workers is the surrender of power to their users when working under Housing First principles. The idea of "Choice and Control for Service Users" (point two in Pleace's core principles) as well as participation and empowerment approaches can be incorporated quite quickly into written social work concepts. Padgett et al. (2016, p.IX), however, note that "[t]he consumer choice ethos… was not an incremental change, a softening of

---

[2] Own translation from German.

demands. It was a reversal of fortune, something completely different." In a study on the fidelity of Housing First programmes in several European and North American countries, Greenwood et al. (2018) found that commitment to the values and principles of Housing First led to important organisational facilitation. But they also describe the scepticism of practitioners when, for example, professionals from external services are quoted: "Well, then if there are no requirements for clients, what will you do with them?" (Greenwood et al., 2018, p.289). In the current discussion about the implementation of Housing First approaches in Germany, this very question is often raised by social workers from the field of homeless assistance. The particularly vulnerable target group of Housing First, namely people experiencing homelessness with "severe mental illness or other disabilities" (Tsemberis, 2010, p.45), is often exposed to rather paternalistic and caring practices by social workers. Participation in the sense of decision-making is often only implemented where it is enshrined in law, and even there rather hesitantly. A classic 'caring' argument is that people experiencing homelessness are overwhelmed with the demand for freedom of choice and decision-making (cf. Gerull, 2018 for Germany).[3]

But why the loss of power embedded in Housing First principles through the transfer of decision-making power to the users can be threatening for social workers? If their clients have their own tenancy agreement, professionals can 'only' make offers and/or point out alternative courses of action. However, the so-called motivational interviewing has long been established as a professional interviewing method that fits perfectly with the Housing First approach. The basic principles are: Resist the righting reflex, understand the patient's own motivations, listen with empathy, and empower the patient. (Cf. Rollnick et al., 2008). According to Hall et al. (2012, p.664), "[t]he righting reflex describes the tendency of health professionals to advise patients about the right path for good health. This can often have a paradoxical effect in practice, inadvertently reinforcing the argument to maintain the status quo." Thus, social workers do not become vicarious agents of their users, and their professional scientific and experiential knowledge is still needed.

However, social workers are not the only ones who decide how the support process should be conducted. Harm reduction instead of abstinence must also be communicated as an approach to the public payers of assistance. Even "flexible support for as long as is required" may be gladly offered by social workers, but not always financed by the payers. This is what the German Association for Public and Private Welfare states in its above-mentioned recommendation: "In the Housing First concept, the structures follow the needs and requirements of the addressees. This

---

[3]   Of course, there are also many social workers who, for example, work with a human rights-based understanding of the profession and belong to the 'facilitators' rather than the people who presume to speak for others or 'give a voice' to their clients.

excludes paternalistic attitudes and sanctioning elements in the assistance process. From the point of view of the German Association, this places special demands on the financing bases to be created for the assistance offered by Housing First…"[4] (DV, 2022, p.5) Thus, on the one hand, some of the Housing First principles cannot easily be implemented within the framework of existing standard assistance in Germany – at least not given the evolved approval practices of some authorities. On the other hand, the evaluations of the two model projects in Berlin show the positive effects that can be achieved by implementing Housing First principles in the support process as outlined below.

"… you now have the possibility to create your own life again"

From 01.10.2018 – 30.09.2021, two Housing First offers were funded as model projects in Berlin/Germany. A total of 78 apartments were brokered as part of the offer, more than half of these to women. Both model projects worked very closely to the eight Housing First principles according to the Housing First Guide Europe (Pleace, 2016). Housing stability during the three-year model phase was 97.3% (HFB, gender mixed) and 100% (HFFB, only for women). This is largely due to the user satisfaction with the support provided in the multi-professional teams, composed of social workers, so-called social assistants, as well as a psychologist and a staff member for housing acquisition and public relations each. According to the two evaluation studies (Gerull, 2021a; 2021b), 85.3% (HFB) and 85.7% (HFFB) respectively were very satisfied with the support they received, and the rest were satisfied (recorded at the end of the model period).

In the problem-centred interviews with users of both projects, they confirmed (in response to the open question about the support offered) the unconditional availability of the support offer, their own choice and control of the support process, and the accepting and empowering approach. One user from HFB summarised what other interviewees also reported through their longer narratives in the interviews: "… you now have the possibility to create your own life again" (user quote in Gerull, 2021a, p.82)[5]. However, the users reacted sensitively when the control of the help process promised to them was thwarted by paternalistic interventions by the social workers. For example, one user reported how his social worker tried to talk to him about his alcohol consumption against his will one time. His reaction in the interview: "If I need support, I'll ask for it"[6] (Gerull, 2021a, p.58).

---

[4] Own translation from German.

[5] Own translation from German.

[6] Analogous translation from German.

In the interviews, both the social workers and the other staff members expressed their satisfaction with the possibility of being able to offer a support concept at eye level in the model projects, but also emphasised the challenging process of getting used to what this meant for them (cf. Gerull, 2021b). Above all, however, the users themselves often described the offer of help as distinct from the support they had received in the past. One user, for example, reported on his previous attempt to be admitted to a project for assisted single living: "… I auditioned there [at the social psychiatric service, SG], and the doctor and the person who did these interviews kept asking me, yeah,… why do you want to go to assisted living, you need to detox. I say, well, excuse me, will you listen to *me*, what do *I* actually want?"[7] (user quote in Gerull, 2021a, p.60).

One user of the women's model project reported receiving warnings and sanctions at a previous facility when she did not keep appointments with the social workers or wanted to postpone them. Later, she had to leave the facility because the social welfare office did not want to continue financing the help. She was told "that all the help I have received so far has not been effective, and that is why they no longer want to support me…"[8] (user quote in Gerull, 2021b, p.63).

Conclusions

Matoušek (2018, p.178) emphasises for the Czech Republic that the "[p]aradigm change towards 'ending homelessness' includes a shift in minds of social workers" and that is exactly what underpins the thesis I put forward in the introduction to this article: Housing First is a paradigm shift of two kinds. In addition to understanding that no one has to earn their right to housing (paradigm shift in policy), it provides a support service that also accepts the 'stubbornness' of formerly homeless people and grants them control over the assistance process (paradigm shift in social work). According to Pleace (2016, p.30), in other words, "people using the service should be listened to and their opinions should be respected."

Through the professional discourse on the approach – which is still quite controversial in Germany, for example – this also has an impact on other support services for people experiencing homelessness. It is about making offers and accepting that the client does not always choose the offer that makes the most sense from (my) social work perspective. It is not about giving up on the client, nor is it about doing what the client tells me to do: It is about being at eye level, about enduring regression, about offering proactive support even after extended breaks in contact. Or,

---

[7]   Own translation from German.

[8]   Own translation from German.

as one user of the Berlin women's model project put it: "[I]t's in the back of my mind that I know I have someone I can call who will then support me"[9] (user quote in Gerull, 2021b, p.60).

---

[9]   Own translation from German.

> **References**

Benjaminsen, L. (2018) Housing First in Denmark: An Analysis of the Coverage Rate among Homeless People and Types of Shelter Users, *Social Inclusion* 6(3) pp.327-336.

Doel, M. and Shardlow, S. (2005) *Modern Social Work Practice. Teaching and Learning in Practice Settings* (London; New York: Routledge).

DV: Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge (2022) *Empfehlungen des Deutschen Vereins zum Housing First-Ansatz in den Wohnungsnotfallhilfen – Konzept und Umsetzungshinweise* [Recommendations of the German Association for the Housing First Approach in the Homeless Assistance – Concept and Implementation Guidelines] (online) Available from: https://www.deutscher-verein.de/de/uploads/empfehlungen-stellungnahmen/2022/dv-1-22_housing-first.pdf. Accessed: 31 October 2022.

Geißler-Piltz, B. and Gerull, S. (2009) (Eds.) *Soziale Arbeit im Gesundheitsbereich. Wissen, Expertise und Identität in multiprofessionellen Settings*. [Social Work in the Health Sector. Knowledge, Expertise and Identity in Multi-professional Settings] (Opladen and Farmington Hills: Budrich UniPress Ltd.).

Gerull, S. (2018) *Spaghetti oder Reis? Partizipation in der Wohnungslosenhilfe* [Spaghetti or rice? Participation in homeless assistance] (Berlin; Milow; Strasburg: Schibri Verlag).

Gerull, S. (2021a) *Evaluation des Modellprojekts "Housing First Berlin"* [Evaluation of the model project "Housing First Berlin"]. Available at: https://nbn-resolving.org/html/urn:nbn:de:kobv:b1533-opus-4896.

Gerull, S. (2021b) *Evaluation des Modellprojekts "Housing First für Frauen Berlin"* [Evaluation of the model project "Housing First for Women Berlin"]. Available at: https://nbn-resolving.org/html/urn:nbn:de:kobv:b1533-opus-4907.

Gerull, S. and Lehnert, E. (2020) Soziale Arbeit als – auch – politische Profession. Die Prägung des Professionsverständnisses durch die eigene Biografie [Social work as – also – a political profession. The shaping of the understanding of the profession through one's own biography], in: B. Völter, H. Cornel, S. Gahleitner, and S. Voß (Eds.) *Professionsverständnisse in der Sozialen Arbeit* [Professional Understandings in Social Work], pp.123-134. (Weinheim; Basel: Beltz Juventa).

Grand Challenges for Social Work (2020) *Social Work's Grand Challenge to End Homelessness: Policy Proposals for the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election* (New York: USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and NYU Silver School of Social Work).

Greenwood, R.M., Bernad, R., Aubry, T., and Agha, A. (2018) A Study of Programme Fidelity in European and North American Housing First Programmes: Findings, Adaptations, and Future Directions, *European Journal of Homelessness* 12(3) pp.275-298.

Hall, K., Gibbie, T., and Lubman, D. (2012) Motivational Interviewing Techniques. Facilitating Behaviour Change in the General Practice Setting, *Australian Family Physician* 41(9) pp.660-667.

IFSW: International Federation of Social Workers (2014) *Global Definition of Social Work* [online]. Available from: https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/. Accessed: 31 October 2022.

Matoušek, R. (2018) Lack of Social Work and Housing: Comments on "Experiencing a Stay in a Shelter in the Context of a Lack of Social Housing", *European Journal of Homelessness* 12(1) pp.173-182.

Padgett, D., Henwood, B.F., and Tsemberis, S.J. (2016) *Housing First. Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Pleace, N. (2016) *Housing First Europe Guide* [online]. Available from: https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HFG_guide-en.pdf. Accessed: 31 October 2022.

Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2012) *Will Paradigm Drift Stop Housing First from Ending Homelessness? Categorising and Critically Assessing the Housing First Movement from a Social Policy Perspective* [online]. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303654257_Will_paradigm_drift_stop_Housing_First_from_ending_homelessness_Categorising_and_critically_assessing_the_Housing_First_movement_from_a_social_policy_perspective. Accessed: 31 October 2022.

Rollnick S., Miller W.R., and Butler, C.C. (2008) *Motivational Interviewing in Health Care. Helping Patients Change Behavior* (New York: The Guilford Press).

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books).

Staub-Bernasconi, S. (2008) Menschenrechte in ihrer Relevanz für die Soziale Arbeit als Theorie und Praxis. Oder: Was haben Menschenrechte überhaupt in der Sozialen Arbeit zu suchen? [Human rights in their relevance for social work as theory and practice. Or: What do human rights have to do with social work at all?], *Widersprüche* 28(1) pp.9-32.

Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First. The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction* (Hazelden: Center City).

Völter, B, Cornel, H., Gahleitner, S. and Voß, S. (2020) (Eds.) *Professionsverständnisse in der Sozialen Arbeit* [Professional Understandings in Social Work] (Weinheim; Basel: Beltz Juventa).

Zufferey, C. (2017) *Homelessness and Social Work. An Intersectional Approach* (London; New York: Routledge).