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UNDERSTANDING THE UNKNOWN: WORK DISCUSSION AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING CASE-UNDERSTANDING COMPETENCIES

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Abstract: In the context of academic training for social educators in Vienna, increasing emphasis is being placed on supporting the development of core competencies with a focus on forming a detailed appreciation of the client's situation — "case understanding". The method of Work Discussion described in this article is based on a psychodynamic theory founded in the psychoanalytic tradition. It enables seminar groups to reflect on, and think in a differentiated manner about, interactions and relationship dynamics between people in psychosocial fields of work. The article introduces key ideas on the professionalism of social pedagogical professionals and explains common theories of professionalization in this research field. Using the example of Work Discussion, I elaborate characteristics of psychodynamically oriented professionalization in academic education and training for social work professionals. The final part of the article is a discussion of how psychodynamically oriented professionalism could facilitate a transformation in professional practice.

Keywords: work discussion, psychoanalysis, professionalization, social work

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Methodological Approaches to Case Understanding in Social Work [1]

In social work, the ability to understand the complex life situations of clients plays a central role. Professional actions to address the complex problems of individuals require differentiated descriptions of their psychosocial situations. For these descriptions, various case frameworks have emerged in social work that reduce the complexity of individual life situations and case histories.

Various approaches to case work are integral to both the training of social work professionals and the processes of intervision[2] or supervision in practice (Gahleitner et al., 2013; Heiner, 2013; Kent, 2014; LeCroy, 2014; Nauerth, 2016; Ruch et al., 2018). Reflecting on cases within these approaches enables the adoption of methodological frameworks that support a systematic and comprehensible analysis of practice and its inherent challenges. Case processing within intervision and supervision focuses on addressing diverse aspects and possibilities of professional action. It provides professionals with fresh perspectives on their practices, thereby unlocking new opportunities for shaping them. Supervision and practice consultation in social work aim to foster greater clarity and confidence when reflecting on practice and engaging in professional actions. These objectives are achieved with various advisory techniques. Cases discussed during intervision and supervision are frequently characterized by direct involvement of the professional involved, who is seeking more clarity and confidence with regard to their actions.

On the other hand, case work in higher education contexts seeks to enhance both the comprehension and the practical skills of professionals. Using casuistry, theoretical models can bridge the gap between theory and practice while helping professionals adopt a perspective beyond the immediate necessity to act. Müller (2017, p. 40) highlighted the importance of creating "casuistic spaces" — spaces dedicated to reflective analysis, transforming first-order case narratives into second-order cases. This transformation enables professionals to derive actionable steps (p. 40). The integration of casuistic spaces and specific case frameworks has become a cornerstone of multiple social work domains. Furthermore, case work in social work encompasses collaboration within networks, addressing responsibilities, and utilizing the resources of external institutions. At the same time, it must be understood as self-reflective relationship work with clients (p. 22).

If social work is seen as a relationship-based profession (Gahleitner, 2020; Ruch et al., 2018), the question of the characteristics and development of professional relationship-building arises, alongside the profession-specific demand for a high level of expertise. From this perspective, social work professionals must be able to thoughtfully reflect on specific practical situations, understand the factors inherent to relationships, and implement corresponding forms of

[1] This article was initially translated from German to English with the assistance of AI. The author then carefully edited and refined the text to preserve its nuance and ensure linguistic precision.

[2] "Intervision" refers to peer-led group reflection.

professional action. Work Discussion, a method of practice reflection conducted in seminar-like small-group settings, facilitates the development and deepening of skills for differentiated perception and understanding of professional situations (Datler & Datler, 2014).

The Fundamental Assumptions of the Psychoanalytic Approach in Social Work

Within the discipline of social pedagogy, a considerable number of theoretical approaches have evolved over time, each offering distinct perspectives on the subject. In the realm of social work, psychoanalytic theory appears to be less widely adopted. Psychoanalytic theory originates from the field of psychoanalysis, which was founded by Sigmund Freud. In their pursuit of treatments for neurotic disorders, the Austrian psychiatrists Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer drew inspiration from the work of the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot during a study visit to France. They discovered that hysteria was not caused by physical conditions but rather stemmed from psychological factors. Building on these findings, Breuer and Freud developed a therapeutic approach wherein recalling traumatic events and their associated emotions could facilitate the healing of such disorders.

Freud's theory and practice for treating mental illnesses were based on three fundamental assumptions, which continue to be reflected in depth-psychological approaches today. At the core, the assumption of a ubiquitous dynamic unconscious serves as the foundation for other assumptions and theories. It refers to the fact that all people are constantly confronted with experiential content — thinking, feeling, perceiving — that they do not (and do not wish to) consciously perceive. These experiences are perceived as pressing and conflict-laden, which is why they are understood as dynamic rather than static (Datler & Stephenson, 1999, p. 84). In this context, people attempt to protect themselves from intrusive experiences since they unconsciously fear that becoming aware of them would be accompanied by unpleasant feelings. People typically develop this unconscious assessment through their early experiences. The assumption of biographical life contexts can thus be regarded as the second fundamental assumption of psychoanalytic theory. It emphasizes the importance of paying attention to people's early experiences, as relatively stable patterns of experience and behavior develop over time (Datler & Stephenson, 1999, p. 88). This leads to the third fundamental assumption: the existence of psychic structures. These structures evolve throughout a person's life and result in individuals experiencing and responding to situations in similar ways. These psychic structures remain stable over time and define the characteristic traits of individuals (Datler & Stephenson, 1999, p. 86).

Psychoanalysis is no longer considered merely a method for treating mental illnesses but is often seen as a "metatheory" that can be utilized in multiple disciplines. The application of psychoanalytic insights to questions of education and upbringing has established itself as a distinct scientific tradition, especially in the German-speaking world. This represents an overlap between psychoanalysis and pedagogy that is commonly referred to as "psychoanalytic pedagogy".

The professionalization of psychoanalytic pedagogy is not limited to the teaching of psychoanalytic theories and concepts. In addition to acquiring the relevant knowledge, it is

understood as an opportunity to continuously reflect on professional practice and to gain knowledge about one's own peculiarities as a means of self-experience (Finger-Trescher, 2012, p. 34). Methods of self-experience in psychotherapeutic training involve undergoing psychoanalysis for an extended period. For the training of child psychotherapists, the method of infant observation was established in London in the 1950s: trainees observe a baby in the family setting weekly for two years and discuss their observations in the form of a treatment protocol in small seminar groups (Datler & Datler, 2014, p. 3). The process of observation followed by group exchange aims to sensitize participants to a differentiated perception of observed behaviors and to develop their knowledge of case-specific early relationship experiences and the resulting changes in the infant's perception of others and self (Datler & Datler, 2014). In 1960, Martha Harris (1987) modified Esther Bick's method of Infant Observation and provided professionals working in various psychosocial fields with families, children, and adolescents with a methodological form of reflection, which she called "Work Discussion" (p. 3). Using this approach, professionals develop competencies that lead to a differentiated perception and psychoanalytic understanding of work situations (Datler & Datler, 2014, p. 2).

Although the Work Discussion method is widespread in the field of psychoanalytic pedagogy, the professionalization discourse in social work has not seriously explored ways for professionals to develop a differentiated view of professional situations that can result in setting concrete possibilities for action. This is a striking omission given that the professional practice of social work cannot provide standardized technocratic knowledge and always requires professional actions that respond to the unique features of a case yet demand justification. This article uses an example to explain the central steps of the Work Discussion method and examines the development of professional competencies in the field of social work.

Theoretical Background of Work Discussion

The method of Work Discussion is built upon several central assumptions and methodological considerations, which will be briefly outlined here. A first basic assumption is that people are constantly taking in — and being confronted by — experiential content. Some content can be brought into consciousness, whereas some is not consciously perceived. These latter aspects of experience (perceptions, thoughts, and feelings) are generally referred to as "the unconscious". Although people do not direct their conscious attention to these aspects, it is assumed that they have an important influence on human behavior. Social interactions — including work situations in which people engage with one another — are significantly shaped by unconscious dynamics, so that every form of professional action is fundamentally pervaded by these unconscious processes. The significance of unconscious dynamics in work situations has been examined several times in the literature (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019).

To understand the basic criteria and the orientation of professional action, one must consider not only the methods applied by, and the knowledge available to, professionals, but also which aspects professionals feel are significant, based on their experiences. The examination of

situational experiences emphasizes the importance of analyzing how professionals evaluate specific circumstances to decide on particular forms of action. Margaret Rustin (2019) highlighted that the theoretical foundation of Work Discussion lies in a belief in the critical role of emotional dynamics within workplace experiences. This perspective underscores the importance of emotions, both conscious and unconscious, that are elicited in workers by their tasks, contexts, institutional constraints, and daily interactions (Rustin, 2019, p. 4).

The dynamics of unconscious content have repeatedly been investigated in specialized publications. One of the most widely recognized concepts is that of transference/counter-transference. This concept is based on, among other things, the assumptions of biographical life contexts and existing psychic structures, according to which people tend to experience current relationships in the same way they have experienced previous ones. Over the course of life, stable structures of experiencing others and oneself develop because of earlier relational experiences, which significantly influence how current situations are approached. Psychic structures are thus seen as ensembles of latent tendencies of an individual, predisposing them to experience situations in a similar manner and to exhibit similar forms of manifest behavior in response.

The Methodological Approach of Work Discussion

The prerequisite for conducting a Work Discussion among social work professionals is ongoing engagement in a psychosocial practice field. Developing key competencies through this method requires a lengthy process of collaborative development in seminar-based small groups, typically repeated through one or more semesters. According to Datler & Datler (2014), four recurring steps characterize this approach: (a) continuous work in a specific field, (b) the regular drafting of detailed practice protocols that descriptively document what transpired during a work session, (c) the ongoing discussion of selected practice protocols within the seminar setting, and (d) the creation of discussion protocols that capture the core ideas developed during the seminar discussions of each practice protocol (Datler & Datler, 2014, p. 5).

As a first step, participants are encouraged to write down in the form of a practice protocol a professional situation that lasted approximately one hour. The practice protocol begins with a brief description of the framework and setting of the presented practical situation. It is essential that the person does not write the protocol during the professional situation itself but shortly afterwards. The protocol should be written based on memories of the situation, which in itself already constitutes a selection of subjective aspects. The protocols are written in the first person and should reproduce the situation with as many details as possible (Datler & Datler, 2014, p. 7). At the same time, participants are encouraged to write the protocol in a manner that is as unbiased and free from interpretations, explanations, and hypotheses as possible. The author should not aim to provide the most comprehensive description of the situation but to focus solely on what comes to mind when recalling it. This memory should create an inner “film” for the audience, allowing them to relive the situation through the author’s eyes. Video and audio recordings are not used, as the writing of practice protocols constitutes the first step in the learning process.

The protocols are discussed in small seminar-style groups, usually consisting of individuals working in different fields; homogeneous groups are not required. The seminar is led by a Work Discussion expert with extensive experience in method application, psychoanalytic thinking, and case reflection. The participants' responsibilities comprise attending the seminars for an average of one week, taking notes during the discussions, and regularly writing practice protocols, which are presented during the seminar. Through joint reflection and discussion of their own and others' protocols, participants practise psychoanalytic thinking and specific forms of case reflection (Datler & Datler, 2014, p. 13).

Each seminar session is documented with a discussion protocol to facilitate recalling the contents and topics in the next sessions. This transforms individual work situations into a thematic structure, rendering the change processes spanning the creation of the protocols more tangible. Thus, the first steps of a Work Discussion seminar involve reading aloud the contents of the last protocol. At this point, there should already be clarity about which individuals want to present their practice protocols in the current session.

To introduce the methodological approach of Work Discussion, an exemplary discussion based on a prepared practice protocol was conducted at the 35th International FICE Congress in Split, Croatia in 2024. The aim was to familiarize the audience with the application of the method alongside theoretical inputs. After the theoretical background had been explained to the audience, a seating arrangement was chosen that allowed a small group of volunteers to participate in the discussion of the protocol. The remaining attendees could observe the joint case reflection but also had the opportunity to join the circle of chairs and take part in the reflection.

The selected situation was a home visit that occurred within the context of mobile family support. The family (M.) had been supported by the Vienna Child and Youth Welfare Services for several years; mobile family support was provided as an additional measure. My colleague and I had been working with M. for a year at that point. Ms. M. and her three children, Marie (2), Samual (7), and Lukas (9), had been receiving support from child and youth welfare services for several years at the time of intervention. The mother's psychological condition had led to Child and Youth Welfare Services placing the two sons in a crisis center and Marie with foster parents. After the mother's psychological stabilization, the children were reunited with the family. At the beginning of the mobile support intervention, Marie had been staying with foster parents; she was reintegrated into family M. within the first year of work. Home visits, regular appointments that usually last about three hours, are generally well received by the family.

After describing the situation, the author of the protocol reads it aloud to the group. The written practice protocol, which had never been subject to analysis, was taken from a series of protocols originally created for a Work Discussion. During the workshop, the protocol was presented to the participants for the first time and then discussed. Due to the specific circumstances of the workshop, the person presenting the protocol also assumed the role of the seminar leader, which

is not customary. Balancing both roles may have introduced unique dynamics, particularly in leading the discussion while presenting one's own experience.

In the next steps, the protocol will not be presented in its entirety. Instead, a short excerpt from the practice protocol will be used to outline and explain the essential steps of the Work Discussion. This focused approach allows for a deeper exploration of the methodology and its application without overwhelming the discussion with excessive details. For context, here is the protocol in full:

> I arrive on time for the scheduled appointment and knock on the apartment door. Ms. M. greets me immediately at the front door and starts the conversation. She talks about her new hobby and mentions the many costumes she has to make for upcoming events. I stand in a cluttered hallway and look for a place to hang my coat. I notice cat litter and food scraps on the floor. I hang up my coat and decide to keep my shoes on. Now the eldest child, Lukas, joins us, stands next to his mother, and shakes my hand. Lukas also starts talking about his interests. He tells me about new playing cards and mentions that he has finally created his own deck. He expresses the wish for me to look at the deck with him to improve it together. He also mentions that he wants to participate in a tournament but is unsure if his deck is good enough. I agree and head to the living room. Here, the family's living room table is covered with sewing supplies, games, and food scraps. Among the papers and food scraps, Samuel sits with his head in his hands. An open notebook lies in front of him. I address Samuel to ask how he is doing. Meanwhile, Ms. M. and Lukas are still behind me, continuing to talk about their interests. Samuel suddenly says, "Man, I can't concentrate …" Suddenly, Samuel jumps up and gestures with his fist as if he's pretending to punch the wall. He then says, "Have you heard of the new mobile game? I installed it on my phone. Do you want to play it together?"

Step 1: Gathering Initial Impressions

After the protocol is read aloud to the group, the next few minutes are used to exchange and share initial impressions, fantasies, thoughts, and feelings. It is crucial to understand that there are no right or wrong impressions: the goal is to guide the seminar participants into a reflection on how they experienced the described work situation. The core idea of this step appears to be deeply rooted in the fundamental assumptions of psychoanalysis. Closely connected to the idea of ubiquitous unconscious processes, various resonances can be assumed when listening to situations, which may manifest through internal images, thoughts, feelings, and ideas. The technique of "evenly hovering attention" (Freud, 1912/2000) is intended to create space for such resonances and to loosen one's own defences against these thoughts.

In small seminar-style groups, various dynamics come into play, such as group dynamics, thoughts about self-expectations, and interpretations of looks or reactions. These can influence individual expressions. By gathering initial impressions, the group gains a sense of security since there are no "wrong thoughts", and every thought process is considered relevant, even if it might initially feel "inappropriate" when expressed. Furthermore, this should allow the group to engage in initial introspection. A key learning effect here is the realization that reflecting on oneself can be helpful in understanding others, even if one perceives one's own internal thoughts, impulses, and emotions as "inappropriate".

While the situation was being read aloud, the audience members experienced feelings of restlessness, nervousness, and concern about having overlooked something specific. One participant stated that she felt the author of the protocol had done a good job. Although the evaluation of the work method in the context of the presented situation is generally avoided in a Work Discussion group, these thoughts were initially allowed. Listening to the described situation seemed to have triggered a need in the participant to express praise for the work method (the relevance of this will become clear later). At a later stage, the feelings of restlessness and nervousness may be understood as having reflected the family situation. Restlessness inducing a lack of concentration might point to Samuel's experience[3], as he could have perceived the described home visit as unsettling. Impressions emerge suggesting that Samuel may have experienced similar feelings while completing his homework. This led to initial hypotheses about why Samuel might be struggling to concentrate. Additionally, the restlessness might also reflect the experience of the social pedagogue who conducted the home visit, who may have found the current family situation overwhelming, thus transforming the attempt to focus on the essential into a struggle. Central to this point is the assumption that the group functions as an emotional resonance space, in which the unfolding events serve as an opportunity to reflect on what is invisible yet still exerts an influence.

Step 2: Protocol Re-Reading Based on Processes of Joint Reflection

In the next step, the practice protocol is reviewed line by line and passage by passage, with the exchange of considerations and thoughts on how the manifest level of meaning in the protocol can be understood against the background of a latent level. The discussions focus on exploring possible interpretations and understanding of the (unconscious) dynamics expressed and active within the described interactions (Datler & Datler, 2014, p. 14). Central to the joint reflection on the latent meaning is the shared understanding in the hermeneutic sense: the seminar leader continually directs the processes of mutual understanding toward the clues in the material. In doing so, all hypotheses and thoughts acquire significance, with the understanding that this is an approximation rather than an exact explanation of the manifest phenomena found in the text. The guiding element of understanding is not the evaluation of the situation or the identification of potential problems or

[3] The thoughts outlined in this step refer to the concept of transference and countertransference, which holds significant prominence in the professional literature.

resources, but rather the level of experience and the development of relevant relational experiences or potential educational processes. Datler and Datler (2014) explained that seminar participants continually engage with the question of how the author of the protocol, who is central to the description, as well as the individuals mentioned in the protocol, might have experienced the described situations. They also consider how these experiences could have influenced the emergence and evolution of the interactions and situations described.

At the core of the joint reflection on the practice situation outlined in the protocol, participants aim to understand what the individuals who are described, including the author, might have experienced in the situation. Additionally, they reflect on how these experiences may have shaped the individuals' behavior and the relational dynamics involved. Participants also consider how these experiences might have evolved within the context described and influenced subsequent actions and behaviors. Datler and Datler (2014) outlined an iterative process of reflection, whereby participants examine how newly gained experiences may have affected the progression of the interactions and what relational dynamics the individuals could have experienced during each successive moment (p. 15). Based on the protocol excerpt presented here, the first situation emerges:

> I arrive on time for the scheduled appointment and knock on the apartment door. Ms. M. greets me immediately at the front door and starts the conversation. She talks about her new hobby and mentions the many costumes she has to make for upcoming events.

The situation begins with the appearance of Ms. M., who is already waiting at the entrance for the social worker to tell him about her new hobbies. In this opening sequence, Ms. M. seems to present herself as dedicated and diligent. In the joint reflection, the hypothesis arose that Ms. M. seeks admiration from the social worker by showing him the many new dresses she has sewn. Moreover, Ms. M. herself might be so proud of her new dresses that she wants to share her joy with the social worker. The analysis of the social worker's perception of the situation included thoughts that he might feel welcome or that he might experience feelings of joy and relief upon meeting a motivated and cheerful Ms. M. at the doorstep. The situation continues as follows:

> I stand in a cluttered hallway and look for a place to hang my coat. I notice cat litter and food scraps on the floor. I hang up my coat and decide to keep my shoes on. Now the eldest child, Lukas, joins us, stands next to his mother, and shakes my hand. Lukas also starts talking about his interests.

After hanging up his coat, the social worker notices the disorder in the apartment. Scattered cat litter and food scraps on the floor indicate a lack of cleanliness. The disorder seems to disgust the social worker, as evidenced by his decision to keep his shoes on. Although Ms. M. presents herself as truly diligent and trying hard, the lack of cleanliness of the apartment might unsettle the professional — and it might also have unsettled the mother that the social worker kept his shoes

on this time. Within the context of help and control, the control function exerted by the professional might trigger fears or concerns in the mother that she does not meet the professional's requirements. Consequently, this internal dynamic might make the mother present herself as a diligent and committed person to ward off thoughts that the apartment is not in a child-appropriate condition. The situation continues as follows:

> Here, the family's living room table is covered with sewing supplies, games, and food scraps. Among the papers and food scraps, Samuel sits with his head in his hands. An open notebook lies in front of him.

The professional gains further impressions of the apartment and discovers food scraps in the living room, which was assessed in the group discussion as a sign of the mother being overwhelmed. This, however, seemed to contradict the general appearance of Ms. M., who had concrete plans to pursue her hobby in the coming weeks. Within the group, the hypothesis of a shift in the mother's priorities emerged. Thoughts arose that the mother might currently not be sufficiently capable of managing the cleanliness of the apartment, while simultaneously, some group members felt the need to tell the mother that she was making every possible effort to fulfil her role. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the group increasingly seemed to identify with the professional, and focus on aspects that the mother is not yet handling adequately. In this context, identification with others, which is initiated by the seminar leader, can open new perspectives on the situation. Thus, the question of how the children (Lukas or Samuel) might have experienced the situation can be posed. Alternatively, Ms. M.'s perception of the social worker's house visit could be considered, or statements about the relationship between the family and the professional could be developed. A brief excerpt about the other child in the family could provide further insight into the internal dynamics that become perceptible in the practice protocol:

> I address Samuel to ask how he is doing. Meanwhile, Ms. M. and Lukas are still behind me, continuing to talk about their interests. Samuel suddenly says, "Man, I can't concentrate …". Suddenly, Samuel jumps up and gestures with his fist as if he's pretending to punch the wall. He then says, "Have you heard of the new mobile game? I installed it on my phone.

The next situation focuses on Samuel, who is sitting with his workbook at a crowded table in the living room. It is immediately noticeable that he expresses frustration about his lack of concentration. The general family situation or the presence of the social pedagogue might have influenced Samuel, making him unable to continue with his homework.

A closer look at the excerpt reveals that Samuel does not complete his sentence but suddenly jumps up and symbolically strikes a wall with his fist. This could lead to the hypothesis that Samuel is experiencing anger and is symbolically channeling it towards something more socially acceptable than directing his frustration towards himself or those present. Alternatively, Samuel might be expressing his frustration about the apartment or the living situation.

His mental shift to focusing on a new game that he wants to show the social pedagogue could serve to distract him from his feelings of helplessness (being unable to complete his homework) or anger (towards those present or the apartment). By engaging in showing a new game, Samuel might be redirecting his emotions and doing something that makes him feel more competent. This behavior could reflect an inner tendency shaped by past relationship experiences: the belief that there is no one to help him when he cannot do something, or that he is not allowed to show his inability.

Step 3: Incorporating Phenomena in the Group While Avoiding Praise, Criticism, and Evaluations

At this point, a brief insight has already been provided to launch the process of understanding the protocol contents. So far, one might wonder why this is considered a psychoanalytic understanding process rather than being recognized as a hermeneutic approach. Alfred Lorenzer extended the classical hermeneutic method by introducing an additional aspect: Lorenzer distinguished between *logical understanding*, which focuses on the manifest content of observations; *psychological understanding*, which explores the latent emotional content of observations; and what he termed *scenic understanding* (Würker, 2022, p. 167). Scenic understanding delves into the often-unconscious interplay of relationships in alignment with what is said among those present. It incorporates this current role dynamic as a repetition of the participants' inner relational patterns into the understanding process. Each role enacted is both a reflection of and a response to the role presented by the other person.

The "inner scene" of the relationship can potentially evoke additional relationships. For instance, the collective reflection on a specific relationship may itself generate a dynamic within the group, which can be understood as a reaction to the perceived situation and the emotions it elicits.

It initially seemed unremarkable when, during the first reading aloud by the professional reporting on their practical situation, praise and recognition were expressed for their work. However, it was only later, when the protocol revealed themes such as Samuel's unexpressed anger or the depiction of successful costumes as a potential wish for "praise and recognition" from the mother, that group dynamics were questioned as a possible reaction to the scene in the protocol. The hypothesis emerged that the relational dynamic between the professional and the family was now being mirrored within the reflection group. In this context, it was conceivable that the group experienced the home visit as "successful" in order to protect themselves from thoughts of failure or inadequacy. In the context of the family situation, this might suggest that Ms. M. found it impossible to express her own aggression toward the social worker, who was acting as a representative of a coercive force. Perhaps this reveals a relational scene in which Ms. M. cannot acknowledge her negative emotions, fearing that doing so could jeopardize the relationship, lead to abandonment, or suggest she is not a good mother — one who is praised and admired.

In such interpretations of unconscious dynamics, there is always the risk of drifting too far from the material itself. For this reason, it is the seminar leader's responsibility to align the formulated hypotheses and reflections with the content of the material and to seek the best possible evidence. The seminar leader must strike a balance between enabling free association within the group and avoiding certain forms of praise, criticism, or evaluation directed at the protocol presenter or the situation described in the seminar protocol. Maintaining this balance is a critical task and relies heavily on the expertise and experience of the seminar leader. The leader's role involves ensuring that discussions remain grounded in the material while fostering an open, unbiased environment for exploration and interpretation.

Step 4: Reflecting on Practical Implications and the Professional Role with Its Associated Tasks

Careful review of the practice protocol and the experiences of the individuals involved results in being able to use the final minutes of the seminar session to reflect on the implications of the discussed content for shaping future work. The purpose of nuanced understanding is, among other things, to enable a differentiated approach to practice, where gaining new insights into one's involvement in the process becomes essential.

Beyond practical relevance, the consideration of aspects of the professional role might include focusing on the primary task of the organization or integrating the mandate of action, which can provide further context for professional conduct. In this sense, exploring antinomies of one's actions might equally merit attention, such as the tension between closeness and distance, or the well-known dual mandate of assistance and control in the social work context. Even though such antinomies may not be resolvable, collectively reflecting on these aspects can enhance awareness of the possibilities and limitations of professional action. This reflection serves to deepen understanding and may support more informed and intentional practice:

> The concept of role, and its link to a grasp of the natures and tasks of the organization in which the worker was embedded, introduced seminar members to thinking about organizational life and gave the seminar a social and at times political dimension. (Rustin, 2019, p. 13)

Although these aspects may hold a somewhat smaller focus, they could nonetheless provide essential new insights for shaping the ongoing work process. At the same time, the method aims to help practitioners incorporate a particular way of thinking or understanding, or to adopt a specific attitude to enhance their professional practice. This notion underlines the transformative potential of the method, which is not merely a practical tool but also a means of fostering deeper reflection and professional growth.

The final section of the article examines in greater detail how the Work Discussion method contributes to cultivating thoughtful and nuanced professional practice.

Ethical Considerations Regarding the Method of Work Discussion

In certain fields, writing practice protocols can involve sensitive data. Social work professionals often handle confidential information, so protocols must be written with the utmost care regarding anonymity and the use of personal data. On the other hand, there is a need for traceability, which requires as many details as possible to make the experiences of the people involved understandable and reconstructible.

There is a consensus that the names of those present should be altered in practice protocols. Descriptions of the location, work context, and work setting should be disguised, and they should not be specifically identified (e.g., no residential addresses). In this context, the question arises of whether individuals appearing in the practitioner's work situation should be informed about the creation of a protocol. In one possible view, the creation of the protocol pertains to recollections of the work situation, making the perceptions and observations of the author — rather than the setting and the people in it — the subject of study. Nevertheless, it remains the responsibility of the protocol author to handle data from their work context with the utmost care.

Another ethical aspect pertains to the process of self-reflection, which, within the context of Work Discussion, should primarily focus on practice. From a psychoanalytic perspective, one's own psychological structures, shaped by early experiences, can come to light during the reflection process. Seminar leaders are expected to respect the boundaries of thought that participants communicate, as certain situations may evoke repressed themes and emotions. However, from a psychoanalytic perspective, unreflected, repressed themes may emerge uncontrollably and, if they remain unreflected and unconscious, could potentially be detrimental to work situations. Nevertheless, clarifying and addressing such themes should not be the task of Work Discussion.

Another aspect relates to the power dynamics within the group. As described, the group is structured around a protocol author, various participants, and an experienced seminar leader. The power dynamic stems from the perception that the leader is more experienced than the participants. The leader runs the risk of prioritizing their own interpretations of potential topics, which may result in other participants feeling these interpretations are correct, and thus subordinating their views. Hence, it is ethically important for seminar leaders to play down their expertise as much as possible and to approach the effects of their presence with sensitivity. From the leader's perspective, it is essential to endure moments of "not-knowing" and to engage in the shared thought process on the same level as other participants. This involves refraining from adopting a position of interpretative authority and exercising restraint.

Implications for the Professionalization of Social Work Professionals

Various publications in the field emphasize the importance of case understanding as one of the core competencies in social work (Heiner, 2012, p. 201). Additionally, this competency shows

significant overlaps with other aspects of professional practice, such as diagnostics and certain forms of reflection that can be applied to professional actions. Heiner (2012) divides the central competency model of social work into process-related and area-related competencies. Process-related competencies include (a) analytical and planning competence, (b) interaction and communication competence, and (c) reflection and evaluation competence; while area-related competencies can be subdivided into (a) self-competence, which focuses on the person of the professional, (b) case competence, which relates to the client system, and (c) system competence, which pertains to the organization and to collaboration with other service providers (Heiner, 2012, pp. 203–204).

With respect to the categorization of core competencies in social work, this article raises the question of which competencies the Work Discussion method addresses. As previously stated, Work Discussion is understood as an analysis of interaction and relationship experiences and their significance for shaping practice and professional actions, and as a way of understanding the specifics of a case through general psychoanalytic concepts. The multiperspectivity of understanding is characterized here by group-based communication, which aims for consensus within the group regarding various hypotheses that do not claim general validity.

Thus, it is suggested that Work Discussion can be seen as a means of professional analysis, planning, and reflection, as well as an opportunity for the development of self-competence and case competence. The idea of a description free from judgement and interpretation can, on the one hand, stimulate reflection about one's own demands and perspectives and, on the other hand, open possibilities to understand the case in a neutral manner, free from premature conclusions and future projections. "The aim is to strive for a relatively theory-free and non-judgmental attitude to everyone involved, including oneself" (Rustin, 2019, p. 11). Furthermore, Work Discussion helps create a skeptical, reflective space that allows participants to learn to bear with their own ignorance in order to direct a more open view towards the specifics of a case — a benefit that is not fully represented in the competency model described by Heiner.

Rustin (2019) explains that the pedagogical theory of Work Discussion centers around the seminar leader's responsibility to create and maintain a group atmosphere of inquiry. This is characterized by curiosity, skepticism, empathy, debate, and diversity, ensuring that the unknown becomes less intimidating and allowing space for new ideas, questions, and perceptions to emerge and thrive (Rustin, 2019, p. 12). The ability to endure uncertainty is thus essential for developing professional competencies in social work. Professionals who are capable of tolerating uncertainty can achieve states such as the "evenly hovering attention" (Freud, 1912/2000) or the "reverie" discussed by Bion (2022). Additionally, the reflective group setting in Work Discussion provides a safe environment free from the pressure to act, enabling participants to explore various perspectives on cases. Rustin (2019) noted that these groups offer an opportunity for professionals to confront feelings such as confusion, sadness, and a sense of being overwhelmed while remaining capable of action. This space also allows professionals to process unaddressed emotions and enjoy the more positive aspects of their work.

While the “reflective practitioner” approach (Schön, 1995) calls for “reflection on action”, it offers little indication of how such an attitude can be acquired. The method of Work Discussion emphasizes the importance of relationships and recognizes that understanding them represents a way of enabling reflection on oneself and others through group-based reflective spaces as a means of fostering the reflection of practice. According to Oevermann (2009, 1996/2023), social work often operates within a surrogate crisis management framework that does not accommodate standardized action routines and renders technocratic knowledge insufficient. It is critical, therefore, to develop specific forms of professional habitus to navigate the complexities of social work practice effectively. Psychoanalytic theory serves the promotion of this professional habitus: rather than merely teaching the use of methodological toolkits, it allows practitioners the opportunity to develop their own forms of action tailored to the specifics of each case guided by a particular mode of understanding cases.

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