

Heike Stecklum

Civic engagement of mentally ill people. An approach using biographical research in Eastern Germany

**Bürgerschaftliches Engagement psychisch erkrankter Menschen
Eine biographietheoretische Studie in Ostdeutschland
Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2017**

Content

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Background of the research interest
- 1.2 Emergence of the subject and questions
- 1.3 Structure of the work

2. Theoretical and empirical embedding

- 2.1 State of research
- 2.2 Basic theories
- 2.3 Psychiatry and mental illness
- 2.4 Civic engagement
- 2.5 Temporary conclusions

3. The research process

- 3.1 Accessing the research field
- 3.2 Process of data acquisition
- 3.3 Particular research conditions
- 3.4 Further data sources
- 3.5 Self-presentation, interview-structure, and interaction
- 3.6 Context of family and social history
- 3.7 Civic engagement as part of the biographical construction
- 3.8 Case evaluation

4. Biographical case reconstructions

- 4.1 Angelika Wunderwald: "to be somewhere on the way, doing all these actions for other people influenced by my first vision"
- 4.2 Jens König: "and than began the help among ourselves, of course with me in the center stage"
- 4.3 Andreas Bräuer: "Employment at first"

5. Comparison, results and theoretical generalization

- 5.1 Construction of distinctive types
- 5.2 Discussion of results
- 5.3 Consequences for the management of civic engagement
- 5.4 Conclusions and outlook

Summary

In modern societies civic engagement is defined and described as an important resource. The committee of enquiry "The future of civic engagement", put in place by the German government in 1999, represents an indicator of the rising social importance of civic engagement. This development is connected with an increasing research interest particularly focused on social groups that are underrepresented in fields of civic engagement. But, despite of the political interest to mobilize members of these groups to be civically engaged, there is little knowledge about the interests and civic activities of mentally ill people.

However, the rising number of people who get psychiatric diagnoses has been identified and discussed as a big societal problem. After getting a diagnose those people often suffer by social problems like become unemployed, lose social ties or become homeless. That's why there is a big political interest to learn more about the circumstances of life, social inclusion and activities of those people.

By taking focus on the civic engagement of mentally ill people in Eastern Germany my PhD thesis contributes at closing this knowledge gap. The background of this investigation is the process of social transformation after the break down of the socialist system in autumn 1989. Hence, my study contributes to the field of historical research in Eastern Germany. By choosing the methodical approach of biographic-narrative interviews and biographic case-reconstructions - introduced by Gabriele Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1995, 2011) - I investigated the biographical trajectories that led to the different forms of civic engagement of 16 mentally ill people. Which experiences during their socialization in family and society led to their engagement? Do they have special resources to be engaged civically despite difficult and adverse experiences and life circumstances like being diagnosed mentally ill and experiencing social changes? Could the psychiatric diagnose and the breakdown of the GDR be seen as structural conditions for the begin of a civic engagement?

The sociological analysis of the biographies revealed explanations and theoretical generalizations. I found out two distinct types of courses to act. Type A is represented by most of the biographers who are volunteering continuously. Type B is represented by biographers who started to volunteer later in life. Further, I found differences that allowed me to construct a few subtypes. These subtypes A1...A4 and B1...B2 can be described by different initial biographical situations and they developed certain strategies to deal with it. Biographers who represent one of these

types have different biographical orientations that influence their civic engagement. They deal with complicated dynamics in their families (A1, B1), seek for social recognition (A2), continue a family tradition (A3) or try to construct biographical normality (B2).

The interviewees are volunteering in different social fields like sports, culture, church communities, social psychiatry, self-help, and politics. Therefore they use a lot of personal, familial and societal resources. Among the resources I identified, those based on the experiences of secure employment and civic engagement in the GDR turned out to be very important. By means of volunteering the biographers are able to do some biographical work on their adverse experiences with the goal of better social acceptance and inclusion. Thereby, they be enabled themselves to live a more normal and successful life than other psychiatric patients.

Nevertheless, having a look on the resources and action of biographers who are diagnosed mentally ill can contribute to modify and correct medical and public discourses that highlight problems and deficits of those people.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (1995): *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (2011): *Interpretative Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung*. 3., aktualisierte und erg. Aufl. Weinheim [u.a.]: Juventa (Grundlagentexte Soziologie).