# Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work with Right-Wing Youth Groups: Solutions based on the document *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles* by the *International Federation of Social Workers* (IFSW)

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#### **Abstract**

Social work with right-wing youth groups in Germany is a field in which social workers face various ethical dilemmas. The German national "Code of Ethics", the *Berufsethische Prinzipien des DBSH*<sup>1</sup>, should provide social workers with guidance in solving ethical dilemmas, but in some cases the document itself is responsible for the predicaments. This article will analyze the dilemmas and present a possible solution to them by means of formulating ethical guidelines based on the document *Ethics in Social Work*, *Statement of Principles* by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).

**Keyterms:** Ethical Dilemmas; Code of Ethics; Ethical Guidelines; Right-wing Extremism; Social Work Practice

## Introduction

After a short introduction to the characteristics of right-wing youth groups as a special target group for social work, the following article argues for and against working with these clients. Dilemmas and inconsistencies inherent in this particular field of action, and which evolve when acting on the basis of the current document, will be pointed out. The *International Federation of Social Workers* (IFSW) encourages social workers "to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case" (IFSW, 2004, p. 2). This article takes up that aim by presenting ethical guidelines for social work with right-wing youth groups.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The DBSH, Deutscher Berufsverband für Soziale Arbeit, is a member of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the official trade association of social workers in Germany. It offers a wide variety of services for its members. It gives advice about legal affairs and about professional questions. The DBSH is the publisher of the magazine Forum Sozial. Like every member organization of the IFSW, the DBSH has adopted a national Code of Ethics, which is based on the international one. Germany is the host nation of the general meeting of the IFSW in 2006, which will take place in Munich. This conference is organized by the DBSH.

# **Right-wing Youth Groups in Germany**

Since the early nineties, right-wing extremism has developed into a serious problem in Germany. In 1991 and subsequent years, the acts of violence by right-wing adolescents against foreigners and refugees increased intensively – the authorities reported a number nine times higher than in 1990 (Bundesamt für Verfassungschutz, 2001). After a reduction in the mid-nineties, the number of cases began to rise again and has now stabilized at a very high level.

Current research shows that 75 percent of the culprits are members of right-wing youth groups that are not part of the organized radical right (like parties or neo-nazis), and that 90 percent are younger than 24 years old, 91 percent of which are male (Wahl, 2001). Moreover, up to 19 percent of all adolescents and young adults in Germany have xenophobic or ethnocentric orientations (BMBF, 2001).

It is important to point out that this article is not about youth groups of the *organized* right-wing political movement. This article is referring to groups commonly known as peer- groups, of which their members associate themselves with right-wing youth cultures, such as skinheads.

- 1. Members have a strong undemocratic attitude based on the right-wing ideology of inequality among human beings (BMBF, 2001).
- 2. There is a general acceptance of violence, and spontaneous violent acts form no exception (Wahl, 2001).
- 3. They are part of a youth culture that has adopted the style of skinheads but are not part of the inner circle (Borrmann, 2002).
- 4. The group structures are shaped by hierarchical ideas about gender roles. A great amount of conformity is expected by and of the members of the group (Borrmann 2002; Utzmann-Krombholtz 1994).

## The Irreconcilability of Right-wing Extremism and Social Work

Four characteristics can be attributed to these groups:

Three of the four characteristics can be seen as social problems and fall within the purview of social work.

Right-wing ideology denies the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings (Froechling 1996, p. 88). This view is contrary to the basic ethical principles of social work as stated in the document *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles*. Fundamental values such as *equality* and *non-discrimination (Centre for Human Rights/IFSW/IASSW, 1994)* are not acknowledged in right-wing extremism.

The equality of all people is rejected when human dignity for all is denied. Additionally, the right-wing ideology views the human being not as an individual but as part of the whole. Consequently, the individual has far more duties than rights.

Right-wing extremism defines a person in terms of his or her race and ethnicity. Stating that the race of a person determines one's behavior and that these habits are therefore unchangeable, right-wing ideology asserts that mankind is divided into groups of persons of different worth. Based on that ideology, right-wing adolescents justify the discriminatory and offensive actions against people whom they view as inferior.

Social work has the obligation to respect the dignity and worth of human beings and challenge negative discrimination. Because trying to change beliefs is a dangerous territory for social workers who are supposed to respect different beliefs, it is necessary to point out that according to the drafted document of the IFSW, "respecting the right to self- determination" is a crucial point which includes to "promote people's rights to make their own choices and decisions, irrespective of their values and life choices." Yet this can only be done under the condition where their values and choices do "not threaten the rights and legitimate interests of others" (IFSW, 2004, p. 4). However, as pointed out earlier, this is one of the principles that right-wing ideology promotes. Therefore, there is an imminent duty for social workers to work against right-wing extremism. Thus, attempting to change the attitudes of right-wing adolescents is ethically justified.

It is obvious that violence essentially opposes the value of *life*. The fact that violent actions threaten the physical integrity of human beings (as a need, a value and a humane right) indicates that social work has an obligation to act against those actions. The last 15 years have shown that right-wing ideology has a lack of respect for life as a value: more than a hundred people have been killed by attacks of right-wing adolescents since 1990 in Germany.

Gender roles, which are typical for right-wing youth groups and actions evolving from these roles, are contrary to some of the fundamental values of social work as presented in the document *Human Rights and Social Work* (Centre for Human Rights/IFSW/IASSW, 1994). Young men in these groups discriminate against young women due to their beliefs in the inequality between the sexes. Aggressive and violent actions are another integral part of their male gender role. These actions are typically performed within territorial conflicts with other male dominated peer groups (Kohlstruck, 1999).

# **Social Work with Right-wing Youth Groups**

Social workers in Germany have worked with these clients for approximately 15 years. Before that time, social workers generally refused to work with them for political reasons, though there were a few exceptions. To understand the basis of arguments in this conflict, it is necessary to state the crucial points of the discussion around the question of whether or not social work should address these clients.

The opponents of social work with right-wing youth groups argued that:

- 1. Social work handles these clients *because* they are members of a right-wing youth group. This sends the wrong signal to other young people who might believe that this is the way to get attention.
- 2. The goal of social work with these special clients is to integrate them into mainstream society. However, social work does not reflect the political attitude of mainstream culture since it believes that this is not its concern. So social work in that field can be criticized for a lack of political involvement.
- 3. Success social work stabilizes the right-wing groups. As a consequence, other groups of young people get elbowed aside.

The supporters of social work with right-wing youth groups argued that:

- 1. Social work has the obligation to help everybody who needs its help. There is a difference between the problems young people *have* and the problems they *make*.
- 2. Social work with right-wing young people does not mean that their political attitude is accepted. Far from it, it contributes significantly to a change in their inhumane and undemocratic orientation.
- 3. Such a change is only possible if the daily routines of the young persons are no longer filled with problems and conflicts. Only then can there be a chance to alter their attitudes.
- 4. The supporters also argue that in most cases the right-wing attitude of the young clients does not stem from deep conviction but is a form of protest.

Based on these arguments, several elaborate concepts for social work with right-wing youth groups were developed (Krafeld, 1992; Krafeld, Lutzebaeck, Schaar, Storm and Welp, 1996; Borrmann, 2002). They are established mainly on the understanding that social workers in this field have to gain the trust of the adolescents, and that they should try to solve their personal problems. An intensive interpersonal contact is the ground upon which social work is able to point out inconsistencies and help young people to reflect on their attitudes.

# Is Social Work with Right-wing Youth Groups Compatible with the National and International "Code of Ethics"?

The current national "Code of Ethics" in Germany is called *Berufsethische Prinzipien des DBSH*. It is a specification of the international document *The Ethics of Social Work, Principles* 

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and Standards, which was adopted by the IFSW General Meeting in Sri Lanka in 1994. The national document contains some information which is contradictory when applied to social work with right-wing youth groups. The nature of the predicament can be demonstrated by the example of Paragraph 2.1. It states:

The members of the DBSH should challenge negative discrimination on basis of political beliefs, nationality, ideology, religion, marital status, handicaps, age, gender or sex, sexual orientation, race, skin color or any other personal characteristics. The members do not take part in such discrimination, nor do they accept them or do anything to make such discrimination easier. (DBSH, 1997, p. 13; translation by S.B.)

This paragraph states that social workers have the obligation to work with right-wing adolescents despite their political attitude. However, social work with right-wing youth groups contributed to a stabilization of such groups in regions where right-wing youth cultures were already dominant. Successful social work was helping the right-wing adolescents to solve some of their major social problems, but as a side effect, the right- wing youth culture was growing. This rise had serious consequences for other adolescents in that region since they were attacked more frequently than before (Leif, 1992; Zentrum Demokratische Kultur, 1999). In cases like this, social workers are inevitably faced with the question of whether their intervention is a way of "making discriminations easier," and is therefore, incompatible with paragraph 2.1.

The Berufsethischen Prinzipien does not contain guidelines of how to deal with these kinds of ethical issues. The drafted document of the new ethical principles of the IFSW, which will likely be adopted at the General Meeting of the IFSW in Adelaide, Australia, this year, states that the IFSW "aims to encourage social workers across the world to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case" (IFSW, 2004, p. 2). Focusing on this suggestion, the following section will discuss more ethical dilemmas, which will most likely occur when working with right-wing youth groups. Further on, it will present suggestions for ethical guidelines based on the document *The Ethics of Social Work, Principles and Standards*, which may possibly help in solving these kinds of dilemmas.

## **Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work with Right-wing Youth Groups**

The proposed document *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles* names four areas in which problems concerning ethical issues are likely to rise. All four concern this field of action.

First of all, social workers are often caught in the middle of conflicting interests. Conflicts are likely to occur in different variations, such as:

- 1. Between the social worker's and the client's interests. A basic principle in social work is that it has to be done without compulsion. According to the Berufsethischen Prinzipien des DBSH and the document Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles, however, social workers have the obligation to face any kind of discrimination. This can be interpreted as an imminent order for the social worker to do anything in his or her power to change the inhumane and discriminatory attitudes of right-wing adolescents. As it has already been made clear in section 3 of this article, this is not a colonization of the adolescent's beliefs but a necessary step to act in correspondence with the basic principles of social work ethics. Yet, from the point of view of the youth groups, a social worker who tries to change their political beliefs can hardly be what they are looking for. Their main goal is to take advantage of the available resources. In this scenario, the social worker faces a dilemma between his or her duty and the client's interests.
- 2. Between the interests of individual clients and other individuals. Social workers in this field usually work very closely with the youth groups. Therefore, it is very likely that the social worker will witness discriminatory or violent actions by the adolescents. In such a situation, social workers are obliged to help the victims, but are they also obliged to report the culprits to the police? This would certainly be to the client's disadvantage even though it would help to protect the rights of the assaulted.
- 3. Between the interests of groups of clients. In regions where there is a lack of resources for professional youth work, one social worker is often responsible for many different, sometimes rival, youth groups. Distributing the resources (money and attention) unevenly can have a negative impact on groups of a rival youth culture.
- 4. Between other institutions and groups of clients. There is a very high probability for a conflict of interest between an institution such as the police and social work. Working closely with right-wing youth groups provides social workers inevitably with inside information the authorities must take an interest in. The social worker has to decide at which point he or she has to differ from the principles of privacy and confidentiality to avoid an accusation of complicity (Morgan and Banks, 1999).
- 5. Between different groups of social workers. The example given in 2) illustrates how this conflict might arise. A social worker working with the victims of right-wing adolescents would certainly have an intense interest in reporting the culprits to the police. A social worker working with the right-wing youth groups themselves faces a conflict of interest not only on the grounds of his or her ethical beliefs but also due to the demands on the social worker of both victims and clients.

The second problem concerning social workers in this field is the fact that they have a double role as helpers and controllers. This has several implications. One of them is the question of "whether or not control, in the sense of diverting or preventing young people from activities considered harmful, should be regarded, and indeed promoted, as a core purpose of the work" (Jeffs and Banks, 1999, p. 93). Another position argues that the main purpose of youth work is "to socialize young people to fit into society and accept norms" (Jeffs and Banks, 1999, p. 94). These two positions can be summarized as "practice for control." This is a principle which is widely known, but regarding right-wing youth groups, it appears very complex. The examples mentioned above show that social workers in this field are confronted with demands from many directions. The main reasons for engaging social workers in this field are the violent and offensive actions performed by these groups in public. The public expects the social worker to ease the tension. For the public, the problem is solved when the situation becomes less visible and, therefore, appears to be under control. Professional social work, on the other hand, has the obligation to attempt to solve the problems of clients, which are most often very complex. Aggressive behavior of the youths is just the most visible part.

The third problem area is closely related to the one above. Social workers are in conflict with the duty to protect their clients' interest and with society's demands for efficiency and utility. Those funding the work "expect their investment to produce a reduction in the future demand for their services and changes in behavior, while local authorities and community groups generally expect to see the efforts of youth workers translated into a decreased number of offenses and fewer 'kids on the streets' and 'hanging around'" (Jeffs and Banks, 1999, p. 106). Therefore, it seems inevitable that those adolescents who pose the least threat receive the least attention. This causality might cause a dilemma for the social worker since his or her professional judgment or preference might not coincide with the local authorities' selection of worthy causes for funding.

Finally, the fact that resources in every society are limited brings the social worker in this field face to face with dilemmas regarding the equitable distribution. One has to make sure that even the less visible or less demanding adolescents are able to participate in professional youth work.

### **Solutions for the Dilemmas**

Neither the *Berufethischen Prinzipien des DBSH* nor the draft document *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles* offers ways to solve such issues. The IFSW proposal just states that *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, Volume 2, Number 1, 2005 -page 19

it is expected that the "members' organizations will develop their own ethical guidance and codes with reference to [the IFSW document, S.B.], along with their own procedures for disciplining those who violate the ethical guidance and mechanisms for promoting education, debate and discussion on ethical issues in social work" (IFSW, 2004, p. 1). The current IFSW document adopted by the General Meeting in 1994, *The Ethics of Social Work, Principles and Standards*, however, offers suggestions on how to handle ethical issues. It states that the national associations are obliged to produce ethical standards for such fields of action where ethical dilemmas are most likely to occur (IFSW, 1994, p. 5) – and that, most certainly, includes the field of social work with right-wing youth groups. These standards (or guidelines) have to be developed on the basis of the IFSW document that offers general principles.

Addressing this issue, the following section will present eight ethically justified guidelines for social work with right-wing youth groups. These guidelines should be seen as suggestions that can be further developed by others. The references in the following chapter are from the document *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles* (IFSW, 2004).

# **Ethical Guidelines for Social Work with Right-wing Youth Groups**

- 1. The ethical guidelines are part of the professional standards. The clients should be informed about them.
- 2. Social workers have an obligation to act in the best interest of their clients, but they also have to respect the rights of others. With regards to the document *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles*, the clients should be informed about a conflict of interest as soon as possible.

Section 5.3 in the IFSW document states that "social workers should act with integrity. This includes not abusing the relationship of trust with the people using their services...." Informing the clients about conflicts of interest and the ethical guidelines the work is based on gives the clients the choice not to get involved. There will not be any conflict as long as they do "not threaten the rights and legitimate interests of others" (section 4.1.1.).

3. Social Work is supposed to act in a way that there is no chance for a direct or indirect support of the political right-wing movement. Political statements of the clients are not a problem – but agitation is.

The political beliefs of the right-wing youth groups are one of their main characteristics. Social workers in this field have to be able to tolerate a lot of their talk – as discriminatory, offensive or inhumane as it might be. However, when this talk turns into organized political propaganda with *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, Volume 2, Number 1, 2005 -page 20

the aim of distributing political ideology, a line is crossed. Section 4.2.1. of the IFSW document states that social workers have the obligation to challenge negative discrimination and section 5.2. makes clear that they should "not allow their skills to be used for inhumane purposes." Right-wing extremism is based on inhumane beliefs that are contrary to all international conventions; the document *Ethics in Social Work* is based on (section 3) and incompatible with "respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this" (section 4.1.).

4. If there is a possibility of psychological or physical injuries to others, social workers have to act. It is an obligation for social workers to help and support the victims of violence.

One of the first principles mentioned in the IFSW document is that "social workers should uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being" (section 4.1.). For this reason, social workers have to protect the victims of violence by any means, and that includes calling the police if necessary – regardless of the consequences for their clients.

5. Social Work with this special target group ceases to make sense when there is no chance to act against the undemocratic and inhumane attitudes of the clients.

An imminent order to work against the inhumane beliefs of right-wing youth groups can be derived from section 4.2.1. of the IFSW document, which states that social workers are obliged to challenge negative discrimination. If there is no chance of success, social work with this group should not continue. This does not mean that social workers should stop working with individual members of the group.

6. Social work has to end if the social worker is faced with violence against him or herself or with non-violent actions that express devaluation of the social worker.

Social workers have the duty "to take the necessary steps to care for themselves professionally and personally in the workplace and in society, in order to ensure that they are able to provide appropriate services" (section 5.6.). Social workers whose health and well-being is in danger are not only personally under a threat but are also unable to act professionally. Such hazards to the social worker's health and well-being are unacceptable and keep him or her from acting professionally.

7. In regions where adolescents compete for resources of social work due to a shortage of those resources, social workers have to divide them equitably – even if the right-wing youth groups are more noticeable in public.

Social work should respect the rights and legitimate interests of other individuals and groups. However, this right is disregarded if social work sees right-wing youth groups as its only target group (section 4.1.1.). In addition, the IFSW document provides a criterion for the social workers' decision of how to distribute the resources equitably; "Social workers should ensure that resources at their disposal are distributed fairly, according to need" (section 4.2.3.). To regard human needs as a criterion for a fair distribution of resources brings into focus "that the fundamental nature of these needs requires that they be met not as a matter of choice but as an imperative of basic justice. ... A substantive need can be translated into an equivalent positive right..." (Centre for Human Rights/IFSW/IASSW, 1994, p. 5).

8. Social workers have to respect the client's right of having a relationship of trust and confidentiality. But they also have to respect their countries' laws. If a social worker learns about illegal activities that pose a serious threat for the well-being of others, he or she should break confidentiality.

The physical integrity of a human being is a basic human right. Forced to choose between keeping information private and helping to prevent serious harm, social workers should choose the second option. Section 5.7. of the IFSW document states that exceptions to maintaining "confidentiality regarding information about people who use [the social workers', S.B.] service . . . may only be justified on the basis of a greater ethical requirement (such as preservation of life)."

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that one can solve ethical dilemmas in social work by analyzing them carefully and formulating ethically justified guidelines based on the document *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles* by the *IFSW*. The document can be seen as more than an unspecific declaration of norms and values. It can also be a helpful instrument to solve ethical dilemmas in social work practice.

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