How much distrust can social work take? Reflections on potential effects of Swiss policies regarding abuse of social welfare

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, abuse of social welfare benefits has become a highly controversial political topic in Switzerland. This has been reinforced particularly by coverage in the mass media. Social policymakers have responded to the resulting loss of trust in the social welfare system by introducing various measures including the deployment of social detectives. However, the political discourse has broadly ignored whether the socio-political changes underlying such measures may also have undesired side effects for social work. Failure to consider such unintended effects could lead to difficulties in the longer term. Among social workers, potential role conflicts could lead to wrong decisions and uncertainties about how to act that are irreconcilable with the professional triple mandate of social work as a human rights profession, and they will certainly not help to rebuild trust in the social welfare system.

Keywords: **trust – distrust – trustworthiness – confidence – social work – social welfare**

The last two decades have seen discussions on an increasing loss of trust in systems throughout the world – in public life, the mass media, and academic discourse (e.g. Beck, 1992; Hope-Hailey, Dietz, & Searle, 2012; Legood, McGrath, Searle, & Lee, 2016; Schweer & Thies, 2005; Taylor-Gooby, 2000). This loss of trust does not just affect state-run and private economic systems but also social systems such as disability insurance and social welfare together with the institutions that provide counselling and economic aid to those in need.

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In Switzerland, these are social security offices [*Sozialbehörden*], social welfare offices [*Sozialämter*], or social services [*Sozialdienste*]. Here one can ascertain not only a lack of trust but also an increasing distrust (Giddens, 1991; Schweer, 2003; Schweer & Thies, 2003; Webb, 2006). The latter seems to be manifesting in an extended debate on the abuse of welfare benefits (Canonica, 2012; Wogawa, 2000).

Both in Switzerland and other European nations, pressure from the mass media and politics on social security offices due to the scandals arising from single cases of spectacular abuse of welfare state provisions has not been without consequences. Alongside measures such as increasing the volume of legislation and intensifying internal administrative controls, Switzerland has introduced police-trained social detectives to support social security offices by investigating cases of suspected abuse of welfare benefits on their behalf.[2]

Drawing on Luhmann's definition of trust and distrust (2000), the socio-political decision to bring in social detectives to deal with cases of suspected welfare abuse can be evaluated as a symptom of a stronger orientation towards distrust. This distrust is directed not just towards the institution of social welfare as a system along with its representatives who are evidently considered to be incapable of solving the problem with their own resources. It is also directed towards the clients, whose trustworthiness is questioned, thereby subjecting to general suspicion in the wake of the spectacular treatment of single cases of abuse in the media.

There has been hardly any discussion on the potential effects of these several years of debate on abuse together with the accompanying socio-political measures and changes to the working environment of social workers.

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[2] For example, they shadow clients in order to gather information if they are suspected to have undeclared income or undeclared possession of a motor car.

How are social workers in the field of welfare benefits expected to fulfil their tasks within this framework of distrust? Pressure from the media and policymakers in the public sphere makes distrust increasingly noticeable within social security offices as well. This may well have unwanted effects that are scarcely reconcilable with a professional code of ethics aiming to fulfil the third mandate of social work as proposed by Staub-Bernasconi (2011).

In this article, we shall try to trace this development both theoretically and empirically. Because there is no research tradition on this specific topic, we shall integrate knowledge from different disciplines (Sommerfeld, 2006) and start with findings from research on trust (e.g. Hardin, 2004; Luhmann, 2000; Schweer, 2003), research in social and forensic psychology on the attribution of credibility (e.g. Fiedler, 1989; Köhnken, 1990), and research in social work science.

We shall consider research in social work science in the broadest sense here and also include social scientific research on social work (e.g. Brown, 2010; Dahme & Wohlfahrt, 2003; Galuske, 2008; Kleve, 2000; Knöpfel, 2006; Legood, McGrath, Searle, & Lee, 2016; Mäder, 2008; Maeder & Nadai, 2002, 2004; Smith, 2001; Sommerfeld, 2004; Staub-Bernasconi, 2007a; Webb, 2006).

1. An attempt to integrate theoretical and empirical contributions to research on trust from different disciplines

Whereas in 1968, Luhmann was still complaining about the 'scarcity of literature' on trust (Luhmann, 2000, p. 1, translated), there is now an almost overwhelming amount of academic research on the topic in the greatest variety of disciplines (Hartmann & Offe, 2001).

There are comprehensive, mostly theoretical but now also some empirical contributions in sociology (e.g. Endreß, 2001; Funder, 1999; Gambetta, 2001; Luhmann, 2000), philosophy (e.g. Baier, 2001; Köhl, 2001; Lahno, 2002, 2004), political science (e.g. Eisenstadt, 2001; Hardin, 2001; Offe, 2001), economic and organizational theory (e.g. Fiedler, 2001; Krystek & Zumbrock, 1993), and different fields of psychology (Bierhoff & Buck, 1997; Köhnken, 1990; Oswald, 1994, 1997; Petermann, 1996; Schweer, 1996, 2003; Schweer & Thies, 2005).[3] When relating this research to the applied context of social workers' interacting with clients claiming welfare benefits, we shall focus predominantly on the micro level of interpersonal trust and thus take a more social psychological and micro sociological approach.

1. 1. Trust and Confidence

Although definitions of the concept of trust vary greatly depending on each theoretical approach, there is a degree of consensus on at least some features. For example, trust is always linked to a *risk*: It can, in principle, be betrayed, and is therefore considered to be a risk taken in advance (Luhmann, 2000) – in the positive expectation or with the *confidence* that interaction partners possess the *competence* to fulfil the positive expectation placed in them (see Smith, 2001) and in the trust that they *intend no harm*[4] (Ripperger, 1998). Hence, trust depends essentially on an appraisal of competence; and central for an appraisal of trustworthiness is the integrity or the assumed absence of harmful intent.

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[3] For general reviews in each discipline, see, for example, Dernbach and Meyer (2005), Geramanis (2002), Hartmann and Offe (2001), Lahno (2002), and Schweer (1997, 2003).

[4] This accordingly addresses motivation and volition. In particular, Ripperger (1998) relates the concept of trust (disassociated from that of confidence) exclusively to the aspect of intention.

In his pioneering analysis, Luhmann (2000) outlined the significance of the *complexity reducing mechanism* of trust. If you do not trust, you have to invest much energy in searching for the relevant information to reach a decision.

Given the high level of complexity during the interaction between social worker and client or when appraising the trustworthiness of individuals and the credibility of their statements, trust is a necessary precondition for being able to function at all in everyday life.

Alongside this functional aspect, psychological trust research views trust above all as a social *attitude*. Attitudes contain a cognitive, an affective, and a conative component (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). However, even on this level, there is already no real consensus. For example, Lahno (2002) takes a philosophical approach and emphasizes the affective components of trust when stating that a trustful expectation emerges from an 'emotional attitude of an Individual A towards another Individual B in a specific situation in which A and B interact' (p. 210, translated).

With this definition, Lahno distances himself explicitly from the behavioural (Deutsch, 1958; Solomon, 1960) and cognitive (Loomis, 1959) concepts of trust in classic social psychology. He also points out that the assumption among economists that individuals form their beliefs in line with the laws of probability theory by evaluating the information available to them in a rational way has been proven false empirically and particularly fails to match real trust-forming processes outside the laboratory (Lahno, 2002, p. 257). Approaches in trust theory can also be differentiated according to whether trust is viewed as a personality disposition (e.g. Rotter, 1971) or as a situational variable (e.g. Deutsch, 1958).

However, several factor analyses were unable to confirm Rotter's (1971) concept of 'generalized trust' when assessing the construct validity of the 'Interpersonal Trust Scale' based on this concept of trust as a single dimension. It was far more the case that results indicated a more domain-specific trust. Schweer's (1996, 1997) differential trust theory went further, proposing that trust is equally determined by both personal and situational variables along with the links between them. He assumes that alongside individual differences in the propensity to trust, communication partners have normative expectations regarding how others should behave in order to be perceived as trustworthy (Schweer, 2003; Schweer & Thies, 2005).

Drawing on Schweer (1996, 2003), who, unlike most other trust theorists, has tried to integrate different theoretical perspectives on trust into one theoretical framework, we assume that social workers have a domain-specific trust concept towards their clients that – depending on what experiences they have gathered during their previous careers – will make them more or less distrustful of those receiving welfare benefits or at least of a sub-set of these persons. We shall consider the special characteristics of distrust and generalized distrust in sections 4.2. to 4.4. However, we first need to differentiate between credibility and trustworthiness.

1.2. Credibility and trustworthiness

The scientific discourse on distinguishing *credibility* from trustworthiness is far from any consensus (see Götsch, 1994; Köhnken, 1990; Petermann, 1996; Schweer & Thies, 2005).

Drawing on Möllering and Sydow (2005), we assume that *credibility* refers to the veracity and consistency of past (speech) acts[5] whereas *trustworthiness* refers to the future acts of a speech partner. Both aspects are relevant in the context of social work in the field of welfare benefits. Appraisals of the validity of reports in a proposed investigation of suspected abuse of welfare benefits refer to available information.

Hence, we view the decision-making situation here as being related to credibility. At the same time, the current interaction is related to trust when considering future cooperation, and this calls for trustworthiness.

1.3. Personal trust and trust in the system

One critical distinction is between whether one is addressing *interpersonal trust* or *trust in the system*. Interpersonal trust refers to concrete interaction partners; trust in the system, to an institution, organization, or society (Schweer, 2003; Schweer & Thies, 2003). Both aspects are relevant in the context of social work. In her theoretical and empirical analysis from the perspective of social work studies, Wagenblass (2004) further differentiates between an institutional and an interpersonal dimension of trust in the system.

The interpersonal dimension of trust in the system is the micro level of the interaction between social workers and their clients, because, although linked to individuals, this form of trust does not (in contrast to *interpersonal* trust) refer to their individual characteristics but to their professional competencies and actions in their *role* as representatives of the system.

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[5] In this sense, judging the validity of a statement within an ongoing interaction is also related to the past, because it can occur only after the statement has been uttered.

Whether these two aspects can be distinguished so clearly would seem to be open to discussion, particularly in light of the major interindividual differences ascertained by Maeder and Nadai (2004).

Nonetheless, we consider the demarcation from interpersonal trust to be relevant within the action context of social work. When we focus on the level of interpersonal trust in the following, we do not primarily mean the aspect of interpersonal trust as defined by Wagenblass (2004), but the role expectation given in the context under study.

2. Socio-political trends and their consequences for the job profile of social workers: No risks and side effects?

Although European and international comparisons show Switzerland to be one of the wealthiest countries in the world, approximately 7.6 per cent of the Swiss population currently live in poverty (Schuwey & Knöpfel, 2014). Swiss residents living below the national minimum subsistence level who have no alternative basic income are entitled to apply for social welfare benefits. However, approximately between only one in two and one in three of those entitled actually take advantage of this option (Schuwey & Knöpfel, 2014).

Due to economic and social changes (Bachofen, 2007; Knöpfel, 2006) along with sustained population growth, there has been not only an increase in the number of cases since the 1990s[6] but also a change in the clients of social welfare and the problems they have.

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[6] This has now been the case for several years even though the proportion of those receiving benefits has remained constant (e.g. Schuwey & Knöpfel, 2014)

Welfare benefits are no longer a subsidiary assistance for tackling emergencies or assistance for the 'classic' groups of persons in need (e.g., the homeless or addicted). They have become an instrument for securing subsistence for unemployed persons in their best working years (Drilling, 2007), for single parents, and for large families.

Policymakers and social welfare offices have responded to this trend by increasingly adopting an achievement orientation, incentive systems, and controls; by carrying out task analyses and imposing restrictions; or by delegating services (Ferroni, 2008, p. 84). This trend, which can also be observed internationally, has frequently been criticized as an economization of social work (e.g. Staub-Bernasconi, 2007a, 2008).

A significant aspect in this context is the introduction of 'new public management' (with, e.g., an achievement orientation and benchmarking) to the social services (for critical assessments of manageralism, see, e.g., Baines & van den Broek, 2016; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Garrett, 2014; Heffernan, 2006; Kirkpatrick, Ackroyd, & Walker, 2005; Maeder, 2001; Walton, 2005). Mäder, Knöpfel, and Kutnzer (2009) found, for example, that the increasing demand for efficiency leads to a concentration on those simple cases that promise quick success. Clients with complicated problems, in contrast, are often neglected.

The trends sketched above have also led to a change in the job profile of social workers (Kirkpatrick et al., 2005). Their 'classic' activities such as counselling have given way to an 'administration of poverty' (Ferroni, 2008; Mäder, 2008; Ruder, 2004). There is a risk 'of the social work pendulum that swings between assistance and control getting stuck on the side of an instrument of power used to discipline precarious social groups' (Keller, 2007, p. 5, translated).

This criticism comes not only from the social workers themselves (Mäder, 2008) but also from their clients (Furrer, 2005). The socio-political background to these developments is a shift in the debate over the welfare state in Switzerland that started in the mid-1990s. The principle of support as a citizen's right has been replaced increasingly by the idea of an activating welfare state based on a principle that receivers of benefits should make some effort in return (Kutzner, 2009; Wyss, 2007). Similar debates also emerged a few years earlier in other countries (e.g., Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Kessl & Otto, 2002; Opielka, 2004, 2008). In the terminology of Bec (1998), this is a shift from the principle of assistance as a legal right to a principle of debt in which a service is expected in return.

In Switzerland, this trend was reflected in the guidelines of the Swiss Conference for Social Welfare (SKOS, 2005) that recommended using financial incentives to encourage the integration of welfare benefit claimants into the vocational training system or the regular labour market – a recommendation based on a principle of quid pro quo (see also Bühlmann, 2005).

One way to gain support for such far-reaching socio-political changes is through extended debates on abuse in the mass media (Nef, 2008; Wogawa, 2000) – even though the abuse argument and the claim that Switzerland cannot afford a welfare state seem questionable when related to reality (Wall-Strasser, Füreder, Gstöttner-Hofer, & Lorenz, 2006): any comparison of the figures on the abuse of welfare benefits with those on tax evasion soon reveals that the latter is far more financially damaging – particularly for the state – than the former (Lamnek et al., 2000; Otto, 2001; Schmocker, 2007). Nonetheless, the abuse argument seems to be gaining in significance in light of increasing cuts in funding.

This results in social policy being presented as a cost factor, and one way to grant political legitimacy to spending cuts is to name the purported causes of these costs through accusations of abuse (Wogawa, 2000; see also Canonica, 2012; Copolla & Kalbermatter, 2012; Uslaner, 2002). Despite the transparency of these mechanisms, the impact of repeated accusations of abuse as a social and media reality cannot be denied (Wall-Strasser et al., 2006).

This puts pressure on social security offices to demonstrate transparency and deliver proof of their competence in fighting abuse, and it leaves its mark on both social work administrators and social workers (e.g., Keller, 2007; Lüthi & Röthlisberger, 2007). In view of the latest peak in Swiss media reports on the prosecution of persons receiving welfare benefits for business fraud and forgery, we expect that the distrust expressed in the language of the mass media (e.g., *Sozialschmarotzer* [social spongers and shirkers]) is now simply taken for granted as an element of social welfare work.

In any case, questioning the trustworthiness of clients will have become more salient – also through such measures as recruiting social detectives. Although such social detectives are generally not social workers, and the final decision to launch an investigation is made by the social security offices and not by the individual social worker processing the case, the preparatory work for such a decision is always carried out by the social worker on the spot, and she or he is the one who is responsible for making each single application for clarification or for passing on suspicions that will launch corresponding investigations. Against this background, we have to ask which consequences this has in the medium term for the work and professional self-image of those social workers exposed to this pressure who have to carry out their tasks in direct contact with clients.

3. Unintended side effects: Possible consequences for the work and the professional self-image of social workers

3. 1. Trust as the basis for the working relationship between social worker and client

Trust figures strongly in social work (Alaszewski, Harrison, & Manthrope, 1998; Webb, 2006), and national codes of ethics are one of the mechanisms by which the trustworthiness of social workers is managed internally. Interpersonal trust is an essential basis for successful social work (Davolio, Guhl, & Rotzetter, 2013; Kutzner, 2009; Schumacher, 2007; van Riet & Wouters, 2002). Clients must be able to trust that they can disclose personal information (particularly over difficult economic circumstances or psychological problems) and ask for help. And they need to have a high level of trust that this disclosure will not have harmful consequences. Creating such trust requires a professional approach to building up a relationship (e.g., Megele, 2015; Murphy, Duggan, & Joseph, 2013; Schumacher, 2007).

To become effective, trust must be borne by an authentic interest in the client. Hence, social workers also need to have trust, because trust is a process based on the principle of *reciprocity* (Petermann, 1996). Only a social worker who not only experiences but also signals and expresses trust is able to cultivate trust and a willingness to cooperate in the client and thereby, obtain, for example, necessary information (see also Nestmann, 1997; van Riet & Wouters, 2002). This is because processes of trust are neither static nor one-sided but have to be understood as dynamic phenomena (Fox, 1974).

3. 2. Distinguishing between necessary control and harmful distrust

Fundamental trust is not to be confused with naive blind trust. Particularly in German-speaking countries, the concept of trust does not have the positive connotations found in the English-speaking world. German speakers often still equate trust erroneously with blind trust; thereby devaluing its significance for successful cooperation (Schweer & Thies, 2005). Fulfilling the double mandate of social work has always required *controls* (Becker-Lenz, 2005; Tabin, Frauenfelder, Togni, & Keller, 2008). These create transparency, are considered indispensable in the framework of (not just) welfare benefits, and are generally not regarded as being particularly problematic (Schumacher, 2007).

If, for example, the seriousness of efforts to seek work is controlled at regular intervals by requiring information on job applications, this is neither a problem for the social worker nor does it fundamentally question the basis for cooperation. From a psychological perspective, even potential sanctions do not necessarily hinder a trustful relationship: a comprehensible sanction announced in advance should certain conditions not be met may well be interpreted as a fair measure.

Indeed, it may even facilitate trust because the partner is experienced as being *reliable* (Petermann, 1996). However, things are different when, in contrast, doubt is cast either implicitly or explicitly on the truthfulness of a receiver of welfare benefit's reported efforts to find work. If not only information is requested but also its truthfulness or the integrity of the person providing the information is questioned – and not with an open, that is, neutral basic attitude but with the presumption that the provider of information is not being honest – then this has to be characterized as *distrust*. Just like trust, distrust can be directed at abstract systems, expert institutions, or individuals (Giddens, 1991).

3. 3. Dynamics of distrust

In contrast to the great deal of interdisciplinary work on trust, only negligible attention has been paid to the phenomenon of distrust, its definition, and analyses of its causes and effects (Grunwald, 2003). Even Russell Hardin's (2004) edited book *Distrust* grants markedly more space to trust. Insofar as distrust plays any role at all, it is mentioned only marginally in relation to trust, often as a mere demarcation to the trust concept, and, at times, also as a synonym for lack of trust. However, distrust has a completely different quality compared to lack of trust (Ullmann-Margalit, 2004).

If trust is lacking, there is initially a fundamental uncertainty due, in the sense of Luhmann (2000), to the complexity that trust is no longer reducing. Determining how to deal with this return to marked complexity or how to reduce it to a level that can be handled in daily life requires a completely new strategic decision that does not *have to* result inevitably in a strategy of distrust (Geramanis, 2002). Nonetheless, it *may* result in such a strategy depending on the stability of the previous trust, the extent of the abuse of trust, and the trust-related framing conditions.

According to Luhmann (2000), distrust represents a decisively negative expectation characterized by an emotional tension that expresses itself in anything ranging from anxiety to hostility. However, the awareness of these phenomena can be easily lost, and then distrust generalizes and becomes routine. Not least, distrust predetermines the attitude underlying action planning, and a corresponding decision to distrust has consequences on the level of the interaction (Schweer, 2003). This makes it necessary to ask which relation between trusting and questioning the credibility of actors in welfare benefit frameworks can be regarded as acceptable, and what influence media and political discussions exert on defining this relation.

3.4. Risk of role conflict: Compatibility between distrust and social work

In private daily life, continuously questioning the truthfulness of statements would not just require a great deal of effort. Indeed, signalling distrust in interpersonal relations is socially undesirable and taboo. Behaving in such a way creates a risk of major social tensions (Schmid, 2000). In daily professional work, the social undesirability of critical questioning depends on the specific framing conditions, the social rules associated with these conditions, and the role of the questioner. Whereas, for example, the credibility of a statement is nowhere so salient and overt questioning nowhere so legitimate as in the courtroom (Niehaus, 2008a), such behaviour would scarcely be socially acceptable in other professional groups who do not work as either investigators or judges. This applies particularly to professional groups who view themselves and are viewed by others at least partially in the role of the helper (see Reinhard, Marksteiner, Schindel, & Dickhäuser, 2014).

A respectful attitude to clients is part of the humanistic self-image of social work and how it is viewed by others (Erler, 2007; Heiner, 2004; Kappeler, 2007; Legood et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2013; Payne, 2014; Urban, 2004), and a trustful, accepting attitude belongs to the self-image of counsellors (e.g., Rogers, 1985).

Despite the marked changes to the old job profile of charity and assistance, the motive of helping others continues to be highly significant when, for example, people choose this subject for their careers (Erler, 2007). Kappeler (2007, pp. 83–84), for example, reports that the occupational self-image of those employed in social work continues to be constituted by the central category of helping. 'Helping' is used to shape identity policy in social work in order to acquire a professional identity that will remain stable despite all the contradictions and ambivalences that emerge in theory and practice.

Positive respect as one guiding principle of social work (Schlüter, 1995; Schumacher, 2007) would already seem to be scarcely reconcilable with critically questioning the credibility of reports, and certainly not reconcilable with a fundamental distrust of clients (Reinhard et al., 2014). In contrast, it is the basic principle of 'preferential [*parteinehmend*] practice' that would seem to be central (Galuske, 2007).

At the same time, when engaging in their practical work, social workers depend strongly on statements being valid. Nowadays, they have to make far-reaching decisions based on clients' reports under a high level of uncertainty: for example, on blocking welfare payments because of a lack of cooperation (Brühl, 2002; Tschudi, 2005) or on clarifying possible threats to the best interests of a child (Legood et al., 2016; Whittaker & Havard, 2015).

Particularly with welfare benefits, self-reports play an important role when assessing the need for aid, and this makes the credibility of statements salient. This inherent contradiction in the current task of social workers between the need to 'help' and 'critical questioning' already harbours a potential for possible role conflicts. If social workers are now placed under increasing pressure to assess the background conditions for claiming welfare benefits more critically by being forced to take a more distrustful basic attitude towards their clients, or if they are even expected to do this by their administrators when practicing their social work activities, this will certainly lead to a major increase in the risk of undesired side effects.

The shift from what was previously considered to be a necessary balance between help and control to a markedly stronger emphasis on the control function has been noted with disapproval in social work science (Keller, 2007; Tabin, Keller, Frauenfelder, & Togni, 2008; for a general review, see Haupert, 2000).

For example, Staub-Bernasconi (2007a) has stated that introducing social welfare police officers to identify welfare benefit fraudsters and the increasing tendency to redefine social problems as problems of internal security and thereby criminalize hardship shows 'that freedom from the state [holds] for the upper but not for the lower segment of society' (ibid, p. 309, translated). In this context, she calls for a return to the traditional self-concept of social work (see also Hardwick, 2014; Reisch & Jani, 2012).

Moser (2006) expresses the fear that models of basic income support proceeding from a needs test combined with a rigid application of welfare benefit regulations have led to a high rate of non-utilization of basic social benefits to which people are entitled. This does not seem to be an unfounded fear in view of the large dark figure of persons who do not claim benefits for which they are entitled – as pointed out by Kutzner, Mäder, and Knöpfel (2004). Against the background of the discourse on the changes to social work as a profession, this raises the importance of the fundamental issue of professional ethics (Staub-Bernasconi, 2007b; see also Sommerfeld & Haller, 2003).

One frequent criticism is that within the framework of economization, social work has already adopted neo-liberal ideas unthinkingly instead of standing up for its own values with the long overdue self-awareness of a profession and correcting the obstructive imbalance of power in order to defend the interests of its clients (Keller, 2005, 2007; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Staub-Bernasconi, 2008, 2011). From the opposite perspective, however, Sommerfeld (2006) counters that the organizations of social work have been dominated by economic rationalities that do not necessarily have the scientific basis or correspond to the professional ethos of social work (see also Payne, 2014).

Schumacher (2007) also relates the basic principle of preferential practice to the double mandate of social work, pointing out that this is not served by a decidedly ad vocative attitude, but that it is always necessary to mediate between the interests of society and the individual – not least in order to avoid disastrous repercussions for the profession in the public world of the mass media and politics. Social workers who have to fulfil their new tasks in direct contact with clients while under the pressure of not only the public debate in politics and the media but also their own administrators (Maeder & Nadai, 2003) may be confronted with a conflict between the professional self-image conveyed by social work science (and thereby the fulfilment of the triple mandate in the sense of Staub-Bernasconi, 2011) and the intensified questioning of claims conveyed by the practical necessities of their everyday work.

Because of the taboo against investigating deception or of even expressing distrust outside of set role attributions, this conflict could lead to a perceived ambiguity going far beyond the degree of role ambivalence between the helper and the control authority which has always been discussed as a characteristic feature of social work with its double mandate (e.g., Erath, 2006; Heiner, 2004; Kleve, 2000). In the worst case, an unelected role conflict of this kind could lead to the avoidance of corresponding decision-making situations, and this would be irresponsible from a welfare state perspective.

4. Intended effect: Does distrust in any way help to recognize dishonest intentions?

Regardless of any potential unintended side effects of a stronger emphasis on distrust, we finally also have to ask whether distrust in any case achieves its intended effect: is distrust a suitable way of better recognizing the dishonest intentions of an interaction partner? Research findings in both sociology and social and forensic psychology cast doubt on this.

Controlling distrust just like controlling trust proceeds across thresholds. In this context, Luhmann's (2000) threshold concept borrowed from psychophysics clarifies not only the dimensionality of trust and distrust (see also Hardin, 2004) but also how even just a minor signal at the perceptual threshold is sufficient to elicit a marked change in perception and evaluation.

Distrust, just like trust, is a strategy for reducing complexity; and this is why Luhmann identifies it as a functional equivalent of trust. Nonetheless, in his opinion, distrust leads to a more drastic simplification: Those who distrust actually require further information about their interaction partner. However, they narrow their perspective to only a limited range of information, thereby reducing the information base for their decisions. Eventually, this makes those who distrust more predictable and therefore easier to deceive (see also Goffman, 1969).

This theoretical assumption also matches both theoretical assumptions and empirical findings in social and forensic psychology on the everyday psychological attribution of credibility (Fiedler, 1989; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Köhnken, 1990). The diversity of more or less unequivocal bits of information leads to information processing based on simple decision-making rules or judgment heuristics designed to reduce the complexity of the judgment process (Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987). Even when these heuristics generally lead to appropriate decisions in daily life (Gigerenzer, 2006), it is questionable whether the same applies when judging the trustfulness of clients and the validity of their reports.

Studies on the attribution of credibility show that people judging credibility orient themselves towards stereotyped ideas about which features indicate a lie. The most well-known and universally pan-cultural stereotype is for example, that people avoid eye contact when lying.

However, in fact, avoiding eye contact reveals absolutely nothing about the truthfulness of a statement (Jundi et al., 2013; Köhnken, Kraus, & Schemm, 2007). As a result, it is not surprising that, despite being personally convinced of the opposite, human beings are unable to intuitively judge the validity of statements correctly (Vrij, 2004) and also neglect the strategic self-presentation of deceivers.

Turning back to the welfare benefits context, Maeder and Nadai's (2004) micro sociological study has shown that strategic self-representation also plays an important role in daily routines at social welfare offices; and that over time, clients develop strategies oriented towards the expectations of their partners. In contrast, actors who do not comply with these social rules attract scepticism per se, and face a greater risk of having their reports scrutinized in more detail and their validity questioned (Maeder & Nadai, 2004).

Those with dishonest intentions can therefore purposefully steer the credibility attributions of their interaction partner's through self-descriptive utterances, a confident manner, or some other form of strategic self-presentation. Findings from research taking a process-oriented approach to deception strategies confirm the premise that deceivers purposefully use their knowledge about stereotypes with this goal in mind (Niehaus, Krause, & Schmidke, 2005). Any comparison of findings on actual deception strategies with findings on purported features of deception reveals that in order to convince their interaction partners, deceivers apply strategies that are precisely the opposite of the widespread stereotypes (e.g., Niehaus, 2008b). Whether this also applies to the clients of social welfare services has yet to be studied empirically, but in light of findings reported by Maeder and Nadai (2004), it can be considered that welfare recipients will also try to adapt their self-presentation strategically.

Last not least, these analyses reveal that even in the, in some ways, strongly regulated work field of welfare benefits, there is always a degree of latitude regarding which aspects of social perception exert a marked influence on case processing. When distrust becomes more important in this context, it may not only evoke major role conflicts and a lack of success in detecting abuse. A basically distrustful attitude can also lead to two further potential problems:

(1) Although it is comparatively easy to confirm that distrust has been justified (you only have to search long enough for corresponding indications), it is scarcely possible to confirm that it was unjustified, because it may always be that one has not investigated carefully enough or waited long enough. This imbalance in preconditions can easily lead to a one-sided testing strategy called confirmatory hypothesis testing in forensic psychology in which a rejection of suspicion is no longer possible (Schemm & Köhnken, 2008).

(2) Distrust does not just change social perception. By changing communication, it also impacts directly on behaviour. A distrustful person asks for different information; for example, less about resources and more about aspects that will purportedly provide clues on intent to deceive for financial gain (Oswald, 1997). Distrust is hard to conceal and is signalled whether one wants to or not (Luhmann, 2000). In the dynamics of interaction, this will not just destroy trust and minimize the willingness of clients to cooperate in further interactions. Distrust is also characterized by the way it escalates dynamically in the sense of a self-fulfilling prophecy and may lead an interaction partner to actually exhibit purportedly deviant behaviour (Niehaus, 2008a). In contrast, those who are actually 'up to no good' are warned by the signalling of distrust and have the opportunity to adapt their strategy.

In light of these theoretical considerations and empirical findings, it seems to be exceptionally questionable whether interpersonal distrust can place social workers in a better position to detect dishonest intentions. It is far more the case that it will increase their susceptibility to make mistakes in such appraisals and place working relations at risk (see Reinhard et al., 2014).

5. Summary

Trust is viewed as an essential basis for successful social work (Davolio et al., 2013; Kutzner, 2009; Schumacher, 2007; van Riet & Wouters, 2002). This in no way means blind trust. This has always been clear, because social work's double mandate has always meant having to act within the framework of the contradictory forces of helping versus controlling (Kleve, 2000; Schilling, 2005; Staub-Bernasconi, 2011). However, socio-political changes over the last two decades may have led to a modification of the job profile, requiring social workers to deliver far more than this balance between the claims of the state and those of its clients.

These changes peaked in both Switzerland and other European countries in year-long debates on possible ways to fight the abuse of welfare benefits. In Switzerland, public trust in the social welfare system has been shaken decisively by media scandals addressing spectacular single cases of unentitled payment of welfare benefits.

Drawing on Ripperger (1998), and differentiating trust into trustworthiness (no covert motives and intentions that counter one's own) and competence (the expectation of which is based on the concept of trust) while using an analogue differentiation of the concept of distrust.

We consider that we can classify the processes occurring in this context as follows: whereas political, public, and media criticism reflects a lack of trust in the competencies of the social welfare system, the social welfare offices, and (on a personal level) the social workers themselves to prevent cases of abuse and detect them, the public and media processing of spectacular cases of abuse expresses distrust of those receiving welfare benefits or doubts regarding their credibility and trustworthiness.

The increasing socio-political pressure on the social welfare offices to act transparently and confirm their competence to fight abuse, and thereby to re-establish trust and confidence in the social welfare system and the competence of its representatives, could lead to an atmosphere within the system and its administration characterized by a lack of trust and confidence. This may well lower the individual threshold of the individual social worker to distrust clients to such a degree that it threatens those working relationships whose success depends on reciprocal trust.[7]

Changed role expectations enter into conflict here with basic principles in the theory and ethics of the profession. This discrepancy between the call to fulfil the triple mandate (Staub-Bernasconi, 2011) and the work-specific demands imposed by social policy could lead to specific role conflicts over the basis of social work that require at least a degree of consideration as non-intended side effects of socio-political measures. Whether measures such as the introduction of police-trained social detectives can actually be expected either to relieve the strain or to lead even to an intensification of potential role conflicts (namely, when social workers have to decide whether to pass on information that will lead to an investigation) remains an open question due to the lack of empirical data.

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[7] This includes not only working relationships between social workers and clients but also the inter-professional working relationships within an organization.

Nonetheless, it is to be feared that the image of social work as a profession tends to have been damaged by this, because of the risk that the involvement of members of other professions will cast all the more doubt on the ability of the welfare system to function. Indeed, an institution that is assumed (even unrightfully) to be dependent on the assistance of external professionals will become less accepted in the long-term if the general public gain the impression that it is unable to protect itself.

If possible unintended side effects of socio-political measures are not considered critically, this could lead to difficulties in the longer term: unreflected role conflicts could encourage incorrect decisions and behavioural uncertainties that would impact unfavourably on both social workers and their clients. This cannot be reconciled with the basic principles of professional ethics or the triple mandate of social work, and can scarcely contribute to rebuilding trust in the system of social welfare benefits or in the competence of the human rights profession of social work.

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