CONCEPTUAL PAPER

Strategies of Social Workers' Policy Engagement—a Qualitative Analysis Among Swiss Social Workers Holding Elected Office

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Abstract

While ethical documents all around the globe call upon social workers to actively participate in policymaking processes, there is little evidence of their actual engagement in this type of practice. In particular, the fact that social workers also engage in party-politics by running for or holding elected office has been neglected in most of the existing research. Therefore, this article focuses on this very specific route of policy engagement by examining strategies for influencing policymaking processes used by Swiss social workers holding political office. To do so, 31 social workers holding elected office in the German-speaking part of Switzerland were invited to write a book chapter in an edited volume. The authors were explicitly asked to describe in detail their strategies and methods for influencing policymaking processes, and to place social work issues on the political agenda. Based on a qualitative content analysis of the book chapters, the following strategies were identified: (1) bringing social work's professional expertise into policymaking processes, (2) doing good and talking about it, (3) presenting facts and figures, (4) organizing the profession, (5) networking, and (6) "normalizing" policy engagement in social work. The findings suggest that political content should be strengthened in social work education and further promoted by professional associations. This would empower more social workers to run for political office and enable them to contribute their specific skills, knowledge, and expertise to policymaking processes.

Keywords Social workers · Elected office · Policy engagement · Political activity · Policy practice · Qualitative analysis

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Introduction

Social work and the making of social policy have always been closely interrelated: on the one hand, the framework conditions of social work are the result of political negotiation processes. On the other hand, social workers can contribute their expertise and knowledge to the political discourse in order to influence these very framework conditions (Benz & Rieger, 2015). For example, both the global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014) and national codes of ethics (AvenirSocial, 2010; DBSH, 2014; NASW, 2017) call on social workers to actively participate in political decision-making processes. In Switzerland, the site of this study, the professional association even urges social workers to use their civic resources in their free time to fight for a democratic and social just society, e.g., by voting or demonstrating (AvenirSocial, 2010, p. 13).

Based on this embedding of policymaking in ethical documents of the profession, the theoretical and methodological discourse on a political social work has been advanced remarkably in recent years—both in the English-speaking (e.g., Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013a; Jansson, 2018; Kindler & Ostrander, 2022; Lane & Pritzker, 2018; Ritter, 2019) and international discourse (e.g., Borstel & Fischer, 2018; Burzlaff, 2021; Dischler & Kulke, 2021; Rieger & Wurtzbacher, 2020; Toens & Benz, 2019). These publications provide guidance to social workers on how to engage in policymaking.

One such guiding framework—the Policy Practice Engagement Framework—was introduced by Gal and Weiss-Gal (2013b, 2015). It distinguishes between social workers' policy engagement as private citizens and policy practice as an integral part of their job. Weiss-Gal (2017a) further differentiates this distinction into the following six paths: (1) holding elected office, (2) voluntary political participation, (3) policy practice, (4) academic policy practice, (5) policy involvement by professional organizations, and (6) street-level policy involvement.

The extent to which social workers in Switzerland are involved in these six paths of policy engagement has been investigated in only very few studies so far (Benz, 2019; Kindler, 2021a; Ostrander et al., 2021). In particular, the fact that social workers also engage in party politics by running for or holding political office has not yet been the subject of research, even though Swiss social workers are active in parliaments at national, state, and local levels (see next section). Therefore, this article focuses on one very specific route of policy engagement, namely 'running for and holding elected office'. In doing so, we address the above-mentioned research gap and present the results of a qualitative study from Switzerland that examined various policymaking strategies of Swiss social workers who hold political office.

Representation of Swiss Social Workers in National and Cantonal Parliaments

The Swiss political system has a strong federal structure. In addition to the Federal Council, the Council of States and the National Council at the national level, all 26 cantons (cantons can be compared to states in the USA) and all 2,212 municipalities in Switzerland have legislative and executive bodies, although

their names, size, organization, and remuneration vary greatly. At the cantonal level, the parliament of the canton Uri consists of 64 politicians, the Grand Conseil of the canton of Vaud consists of 150 politicians and in the cantons of Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, and Valais not only the representatives but also their deputies are elected (Amann & Kindler, 2021a).

There are a total of 2,821 politicians in Switzerland's 26 cantonal parliaments. They always carry out this political work alongside their main occupation in various professional fields. The most frequently mentioned professional fields in the cantonal state calendars are law (242 persons; 9%), agriculture (228; 8%), management (189; 7%), economics (185; 7%), and education (175; 6%). In comparison, social workers (40; 1%) represent a small group. An identical picture emerges in the national parliament, where, as of January 2022, two out of 200 members of the National Council (Barbara Gysi and Katharina Prelicz-Huber) and one out of 46 members of the Council of States (Maya Graf) have a background in social work. No analyses are yet available for offices at other political levels (Amann & Kindler, 2021a). Against this background, the question arises why social workers are not more strongly represented in parliaments and what factors influence the decision of social workers to run for and hold political office.

Literature Review and Research Question

So far, this issue has been addressed mainly at the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological levels (e.g., Benz & Rieger, 2015; Haynes & Mickelson, 2000; Lane & Pritzker, 2018; Ritter, 2019), while empirical research on the topic is still extremely scarce (Kindler, 2021a, b; Weiss-Gal, 2016, 2017b). The empirical debate on this topic was initiated by Lane (2008, 2011) as part of her quantitatively designed doctoral project in the USA (see also Lane & Humphreys, 2011, 2015). Complementary studies with mostly qualitative research approaches are available from the USA (Meehan, 2018, 2019a, b, 2021; Pence & Kaiser, 2022), the UK (Gwilym, 2017), Israel (Binder & Weiss-Gal, 2021), Canada (Greco, 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2019), and Switzerland (Amann, 2017; Amann & Kindler, 2021b).

The results of these initial studies consistently show that the competencies acquired during study and practice significantly support social workers in successfully running for political office. In addition, social work expertise and methodological knowledge are also described as helpful for holding such office. Among others, critical thinking (Greco, 2020), communication skills (Binder & Weiss-Gal, 2021; Gwilym, 2017), participation methods, and concrete, grassroots knowledge about the realities of social work users' lives (Amann & Kindler, 2021b) are identified as critical competencies that help social workers to hold political office.

In terms of access to political office, Lane and Humphreys (2015) and Meehan (2018) identify some important gender differences. For example, the female social workers they surveyed were less likely than their male counterparts to report having

children or having been involved in other political activities before running for elected office. Other factors identified in previous research as influencing the decision to run for political office can be roughly attributed to the following three sources: first, family background and biographical experiences strongly influence social workers' motivation to run for office (Gwilym, 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2019). Second, previous research shows that most social workers running for office were encouraged to do so by work colleagues or representatives of professional associations. Moreover, most of their campaigns were (financially) supported by professional associations (Amann & Kindler, 2021b; Binder & Weiss-Gal, 2021; Lane & Humphreys, 2011). Third, it can also be noted that social work training and practice strongly influence social workers' decision to run for office: in many cases, social workers encounter structural problems in the course of their professional activities at the grassroots level that cannot be satisfactorily addressed in individual case work and must be addressed at the policy level (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Such higher-level macro-practice, as noted in the introduction, is explicitly called for in professional codes of ethics and sometimes explicitly taught in social work degree programs (Burzlaff, 2021; Greco, 2020).

In summary, the state of research on social workers holding elected office is currently not very advanced. In Europe in particular, the only studies available are by Amann and Kindler (2021b), Binder and Weiss-Gal (2021), and Gwilym (2017). There are also research gaps in terms of content: previous studies have examined factors that influence social workers' motivation to run for elected office. Other research has focused on skills and competencies that are important for holding political office. While these studies contribute valuable insights to the body of research on this particular area of social work, we still know very little about specific methods and practices of social workers who hold political office. This article fills this gap by addressing the following research question: what strategies do social workers holding political office use to influence policymaking processes?

Method

Data Collection

To answer the research question, this project draws on the individual book chapters from the edited volume "Social workers in politics—biographies, strategies, and projects of social workers holding elected office" (Amann & Kindler, 2021a) as an empirical data basis. This book collects the experiences of social workers from the German-speaking part of Switzerland who hold political office at the local, cantonal, or national level. Through the systematic evaluation of all cantonal state calendars of the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland, 44 social workers in political offices were identified. Thirty-one of them agreed to contribute a chapter to the edited volume. They were explicitly asked in the publication concept and in preliminary meetings to describe in detail their strategies and methods for influencing policymaking processes in order to successfully place social work issues on the political agenda. The book chapters were written in the years 2019 and 2020. Seventeen chapters are between 16 and 30 pages long, and 14 contributions consist of short statements of one page.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved a systematic screening of the book articles for policy-making strategies. For this purpose, the data material was coded using the MAX-QDA software. The content analysis introduced by Kuckartz (2016) was chosen as a "deductive-inductive" procedure. In a first coding step, all data material was reviewed line by line and roughly coded. Based on these preliminary codes, provisional main categories were formed in a second step. A third step involved the differentiation and specification of the categories and the formation of additional categories. After several rounds, the final category system was determined and arranged. The following six main categories were identified: (1) bringing social work's professional expertise into policymaking processes, (2) doing good and talking about it, (3) presenting facts and figures, (4) organizing the profession, (5) networking, and (6) sss "normalizing" policy engagement in social work. These categories are presented in detail in the "Findings" section.

Study Participants

The analyzed textual documents were written by 31 social workers holding political office in 15 of 21 different cantons in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Eighteen of them identify themselves as male, 13 as female. The youngest contributor is 28 years old, the oldest author is 73 years old ($M = 51.1$, $SD = 14.6$). Their political offices are at different levels: 7 hold an elected office as part-time job in the national parliament, 6 of them in the National council, and 1 in the Council of states. Twenty-two hold an elected office as part-time job in one of the 26 cantonal parliaments. One holds an elected office as a member of the cantonal government, which is a full-time job. And finally, 7 are holding elected office as members of a local city council, which is also a full-time job. Many of the authors have held various of the above-mentioned positions during their political careers, sometimes simultaneously. All of the participants have extensive experience in social work. They are engaged in fields like child protection, education, community organizing, social welfare, couples counseling, addiction therapy, and social work education, and therefore can use their professional expertise to influence policymaking processes.

Limitations

The study has three limitations. First, although the sample of analyzed texts is quite large, it is unclear whether the participating social workers differed from those who decided not to participate in the project. Second, the participants contributed their personal perspective from their memories. It can be assumed that the representations will be reframed in retrospect and are subject to social desirability. Finally, the qualitative approach chosen does not allow for generalizing the findings beyond the sample studied. However, the results provide first insights into the strategies used by social workers holding elected office to influence

policymaking processes. Further studies on social workers' policy engagement should build on these initial findings by adding contradictory or confirmatory results.

Findings

In the 31 analyzed book chapters, a broad consensus emerges that social work has a role not only as an executive organ of politics, but also functions as a change agent in policymaking processes. Consequently, the question is not—as often discussed in the German-speaking discourse (e.g., Merten, 2001)—whether social workers are obliged to engage in policymaking, but rather how they could do so and which strategies are promising.

The individual contributions examined contain numerous examples of social workers policy engagement that impressively demonstrate how topics and issues of social work can be effectively brought onto the political agenda using appropriate methods. Although the edited book focuses on social workers who hold elected office, a wide range of voluntary political participation and professional policy practice strategies can be identified alongside party-political forms of policy engagement. In the following sections, both the explicitly party-political and the civil society or professional policymaking strategies are presented.

Bringing Social Work's Expertise Into Policymaking Processes

In their daily practice, social workers gain a wide range of insights into the realities of their service users' lives and, through direct contact with them, are able to assess how the design or amendment of certain laws and guidelines affects the situation of people receiving social welfare services.

> *Like hardly any other professionals, social workers become aware of the influence that the design of social services has on the life situation of service users. Social workers can therefore draw on a wealth of experience when it comes to tackling social policy issues. (*Schenker, 2021*, p. 278)*

Furthermore, in the context of aggregated individual case work experience, social workers recognize problem and help patterns and can draw the attention of political decision-makers to the fact that certain problem situations are not self-inflicted but structurally conditioned and should accordingly be dealt with at societal level.

> *It is important to emphasize this connection between structural deficits and individual fates again and again, especially since many conservative politicians and, to some extent, also broad segments of the population still believe that each person is the architect of his or her own fortune. (*Schuler, 2021*, p. 338)*

This understanding is crucial both in policy-evaluation and discussing and formulating new guidelines. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that the professional expertise of social workers is in great demand among politicians. They rely on input from practitioners to make well-reasoned decisions. At the same time, the contribution of expertise and the associated insight into the everyday practice of social work also serves to convince politicians of the professionalism of social work and to counteract the following, still widespread anecdotal opinion:

*Everyone can help – no training needed. (*Prelicz-Huber, 2021*, p. 76)*

The knowledge and skills acquired during their studies and professional activities make social workers not only predestined political advisors, but also well-equipped politicians. Many social workers who have chosen to pursue a career in politics report that their experience with, for example, group dynamics, communication, project management, and decision-making mechanisms, significantly supports them in their political roles.

Doing Good and Talking About It

One effective way to convincingly bring the professional expertise above into policy processes is through case study storytelling:

*The everyday life of social work is rich in stories of individual crises, catastrophes, illnesses, and conflicts. Of humiliation, failure, and defeat. But also of hope, of the ability to endure and of the will to survive. Anyone who has retained a shred of humanity will be touched by these stories, if they are not simply told in a blatant manner. (*Gut, 2021*, p. 183)*

Overall, this strategy is about using storytelling to make the often unknown living situations of specific population groups visible and to trigger emotional involvement. Specific anonymized case studies, on-site visits, photo presentations, or public campaigns can be used as methods.

*One of my first tasks in my new job was to house a 30-year-old man, since his room had been terminated due to his behavior. I was able to accommodate him in a very old house in the local community. However, the conditions there were desolate and contradicted my understanding of dignified living. So, I organized an inspection with the heads of social affairs and finance. Both politicians were surprised that people were still living under such conditions. The renovation of the entire house was then only a formal matter, and the municipality was willing to invest around 650,000 francs. (*Schuler, 2021*, p. 340–341)*

Storytelling can also be helpful in highlighting how a lack of resources, insufficient staffing, or inadequate infrastructure impacts professional social work. Moreover, this strategy should not exclusively focus on telling stories about service users, but should empower them to independently draw attention to their life situations and related needs.

Finally, social workers still report far too few success stories—partly for reasons of data and privacy protection, but often also out of reluctance. Success stories would help both the general public and political decision-makers better understand the role and task as well as the need for and effectiveness of social work:

> *Social work must actively explain itself in politics and society and convincingly present its necessity. Entirely in the sense of: Do good and talk about it. (*Prelicz-Huber, 2021*, p. 76)*

Presenting Facts and Figures

While the method of storytelling deliberately refers to exemplary individual cases in order to better illustrate and emotionalize them, it should be noted that social policy is fundamentally not concerned with individual cases, but uses them for illustration. By collecting, evaluating, and presenting facts and figures, social workers have the opportunity to refer to quantities in order to connect to the generalizing character of social policy:

> *Statistical findings are another important instrument when it comes to demonstrating the need for change. (…) Significant figures can be used, for example, to prove that an increase in the number of employed social workers is necessary so that prevention efforts can continue to be made, which in turn will have a positive effect on the finances of the municipality later on. (*Schuler, 2021*, p. 347)*

Both methods can be cleverly combined:

> *Politically persuasive are on the one hand concrete observations and figures from everyday practice, but on the other hand also emotions in the form of moving stories. (*Degiacomi, 2021*, p. 63)*

The first step is to overcome the skepticism that still exists among many social workers about quantitative research methods. In addition to statistical key figures, qualitative surveys (e.g., neighborhood maps, interviews with service users), financial calculations, or theoretical findings play a central role in this strategic approach.

Organizing the Profession

The enforcement of professional interests as an individual is usually not very promising. It is therefore important to strive for the highest possible degree of organization in social work as well. Professional associations and trade unions are available for this purpose, and have at least two different functions. On the one hand, these organizations act as mobilization networks, i.e., they encourage their members to become involved in policymaking—for example, they actively support their members in running for political office. On the other hand, these organizations also act as political actors themselves, e.g., by participating in

consultation procedures, coordinating protest actions, conducting wage negotiations or launching campaigns. The higher the number of members, the greater the influence in policy-making processes:

> *If we want to play an effective role in shaping the relevant discussions, it is important to act in an organized manner rather than as a heroic individual figure. Because the higher the degree of organization, the more power we have, the more we can develop institutions, improve working conditions and positively influence social policy. (*Prelicz-Huber, 2021, *p. 77)*

In Switzerland, the degree of organization in social work is estimated at only 3.6 percent, which means that only 3,600 out of 100,000 social workers are members of the Swiss professional association of social workers (Amann & Kindler, 2021a).

Networking

Building and maintaining networks is another parallel between social work and political (social) work. As described above, the (party) political engagement of social workers is about influencing policymaking processes through professional expertise. This requires strong coalition partners as well as strategic alliances. It is helpful if one can fall back on already existing networks and does not have to laboriously build them up in the respective situation:

> *If you want to make a difference in terms of policy, networking and good contacts with people in influential positions are half the battle. (*Kreuzer, 2021, *p. 225)*

Social workers are in contact with administrative officials, executive and legislative politicians, commission members, representatives of associations or service users both in their immediate professional context and at the political level. In policymaking processes, it is necessary to mediate between the interests of these stakeholders, to negotiate skillfully, to maintain patience, to strive for majorities, to proceed strategically, to take advantage of windows of opportunities, or even to accept compromises from time to time. The stronger the existing network, the more successful these attempts will be.

Actors who apply these networking skills are referred to in the literature as policy entrepreneurs, defined as "energetic actors who engage in collaborative action in and around government to promote significant policy change" (Mintrom, 2020, p. 55). Previous scholarship has found that social workers are particularly capable policy entrepreneurs, as most of them are trained and experienced in negotiation, communication, etc. (Almog-Bar et al., 2015; Aviv et al., 2021; Kehl & Kindler, 2022).

"Normalizing" Policy Engagement

For social workers to engage effectively at the macro level, they must—as a basic requirement—(want to) engage in policymaking processes in the first place.

*In order to shape policy, social workers have to get involved and be elected to offices, i.e., as members of parliaments and executive bodies. In these positions of power lies a great lever to improve structural conditions for the benefit of the people and service users. (*Stocker, 2021*, p. 380)*

However, policymaking, lobbying, running for office, or the strategic use of power are fraught with negative preconceptions among many social workers, which ultimately leads them not to engage in this field. Kreuzer (2021) argues:

Those who want to represent their interests effectively cannot only make honorable demands and appeal to the social conscience of society and politics but must gain influence. (p. 234)

Other social workers are interested in becoming active at the political level but lack the courage or experience to get actively involved, for example, by running as a candidate in the upcoming elections. Schillig (2021) draws on these insights by making the following statement:

The self-concept of being actively engaged in policymaking must be strengthened and promoted in training and in organizations of social work. The professional association has a crucial role in nurturing the respective self-concepts of social workers. (p. 239)

This issue is being explored by a developing body of research on social workers' political efficacy. Following the definition of Niemi et al. (1991), this concept consists of two separate components: "(1) internal efficacy, referring to beliefs about one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in, politics, and (2) external political efficacy, referring to beliefs about the responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizens demands" (p. 1407–1408). Previous research has focused on the internal political efficacy of social work students and practitioners and how their efficacy can be enhanced through specific training and education (Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Kindler, 2021b; Lane et al., 2018).

Discussion

The still nascent state of research on social workers who run for and hold elected office has not yet included work on the specific policy methods used by social workers in politics. This article contributes to filling this lacuna by addressing the following research question: "What strategies do social workers holding political office use to influence policymaking processes?".

Six of these strategies were identified in the analysis and described in the findings section. To strengthen social workers' involvement in politics, there is a need for a continuing (1) "normalization" of policy engagement in social work. This forms the basis for further political strategies such as (2) actively bringing social work's professional expertise into policymaking processes. In this context, (3) using storytelling to report on concrete case histories—"doing good and talking about it"—and (4) the presentation of facts and figures in the form of convincing arguments are useful.

Complementary strategies are (5) organizing the profession—i.e., further strengthening professional associations and trade unions—and (6) building and maintaining networks to collectively assert political interests.

The findings of this study have implications for both social work education and professional associations. For social work educators, it is interesting to see how the knowledge and skills acquired during their studies help social workers to run for and hold elected office. However, there are not many universities in German-speaking countries that offer such courses, which focus on policymaking strategies (Burzlaff, 2021). To strengthen the representation of social workers in (formal) political arenas, schools of social work—in line with international and national codes of ethics (e.g., AvenirSocial, 2010; IFSW, 2014)—should update their curricula to include policy practice training alongside seminars on individual casework. For this purpose, the following three approaches might be suggestive. First, existing teaching materials and concepts from the English-speaking discourse—e.g., Jansson (2018), Lane and Pritzker (2018), Ritter (2019), Street et al. (2022), Weiss-Gal and Savaya (2012)—could be adapted to the German-speaking context. Second, social work educators could teach professional policy engagement in the form of practice seminars instead of traditional theoretical courses. In this case, they can draw on initial German publications that provide real-world case studies (Burzlaff, 2021; Rieger & Wurtzbacher, 2020). Third, international collaborations and exchanges should be further strengthened to enable mutual learning beyond national borders.

Similar implications apply to professional associations, which have proven to be crucial in enabling social workers to participate in politics (Amann & Kindler, 2021b; Kindler & Amann, 2022; Kindler & Kulke, 2022). They can further strengthen the representation of social workers in parliamentary politics through two main channels. First, they should use their position as "recruitment networks" (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015) to motivate and push social workers to run for office. Previous research has shown that most social work candidates were encouraged and (financially) supported by professional associations before, during, and after their campaigns (Amann & Kindler 2021b; Binder & Weiss-Gal, 2021; Lane & Humphreys, 2011; Scanlon et al., 2006). Second, these associations offer their members the opportunity to acquire political knowledge as well as concrete experiences and thus decisively strengthen their political efficacy. This is done, for example, by organizing legislative advocacy days (Beimers, 2015) or offering internships for students at the associations' headquarters (Hartnett et al., 2005).

In summary, this research demonstrates how social workers contribute specific skills, knowledge, and expertise to influence policymaking processes through the identified political strategies. Since there are still few social workers holding political office (Amann & Kindler, 2021a), political content should be strengthened in social work education and further promoted by professional associations. This would motivate more social workers to run for office, increase their political knowledge and efficacy, and ultimately enhance the political power of the profession.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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