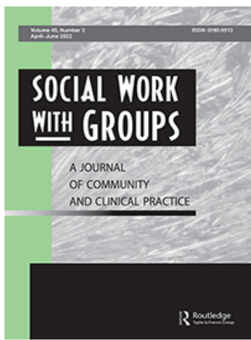

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Social group work in Germany: the rise and fall of the Hanseatic Youth Association (HJB) in Hamburg

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents Hanseatic Youth Association (HJB) in Hamburg as case study in the history of social group work in Germany. During the Nazi era, youth groups of the Wandervogel movement of the 1920s were assimilated by the Hitler Youth, and democratic traditions were replaced by authoritarian approaches to group work that persisted for decades after the war. In 1947, Elisabeth Sülau revived participatory social group work in Hamburg when she founded the Hanseatic Youth Association (HJB), which grew from an initial group of seven girls to social clubs and friendship groups that served up to 400 children and young adults per year. Social group work in the HJB was based on democratic principles and situational equality for all members. Following the closure of the HJB in 1967, social group work was subsumed by a clinial professional model that distinguished between social education and therapeutic group work. Implications are drawn for social group work today.

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The development of social group work in Germany needs to be understood from the backdrop of the interwar youth movement, or to be more precise, from the bourgeois and the proletarian wings of the Wandervogel movement of the 1920s. As noted by Carl W. Müller (Müller, 1988, pp. 165–166):

> The individual chapters of the labor movement's youth associations were initially as autonomous as those in the bourgeois youth movement. The creation of chapters was not a top-down process; rather, groups were formed in collaborations from the bottom up. Yet the bourgeois formula "self-education by communal experience" does not reflect the goals of the labor youth; more accurate would be "social liberation by shared political struggle." When it came to group activities such as rambling, singing and games, working-class adolescents simply had much less time to spare than pupils preparing for university entry. Their principal mode of mobility was the demonstration, what they sang were political anthems, and their games tended to take the form of political agitation on the streets.

In 1933, the National Socialists outlawed youth groups other than the Hitler Youth. In their bid to create a "national youth" in their image, the National Socialists adopted those tenets of the Weimar-era youth movements that they considered useful in establishing a culture of authoritarianism. The Hitler

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Youth followed the Führer principle that combined charismatic leadership, emphatic deference, and unconditional obedience. Officially, these attitudes were abandoned after the Second World War, but in many instances, authoritarian concepts of youth work and group work continued to shape practices on the ground until well into the 1970s.

It is against this backdrop that we discover the extraordinary significance and poignancy of projects that turned their backs on persisting authoritarian and militaristic traditions. One such project was the Hanseatic Youth Association (HJB) in Hamburg. Although the innovative democratic practices of the HJB were important points of reference for practitioners and scholars of social group work through the 1950s, the HJB has been largely forgotten in recent years. This case study explores various factors that contributed to the HJB's rise and demise and explains why its legacy was squandered in subsequent decades.

It should be noted that this paper is concerned with the development of social group work in the former West Germany. Relevant developments between 1949 and 1990 in East Germany would need to be covered separately and are beyond the scope of this paper.

The Hanseatic Youth Association and its founder Elisabeth Sülau

Elisabeth Sülau (1903–1979) belonged to the first generation of formally trained female social workers. In 1927, she joined the Social Work Guild (Gilde Soziale Arbeit), a professional association of progressive, liberal, and social democratic social workers, teachers, and social scientists that had somewhere between 800 and 1,000 members in the early 1930s. To avoid being subordinated to the Nazi welfare apparatus, the Social Work Guild ceased to operate in 1933. During the Nazi period, Elisabeth Sülau worked as a family social worker in Hamburg. In 1947, she helped reestablish the Social Work Guild and emerged as an incisive and innovative contributor to its annual gatherings.

Given her experience of the interwar youth movement, Elisabeth Sülau was deeply convinced of the potential of social group work, and in 1947, she invited seven girls to begin meeting in her flat as a social group. Each of these girls had been subject to rigid supervision by the public welfare authorities, because their conduct was deemed troubling in some respect or another. Young men from the Social Work Guild soon joined, laying the foundation for the democratic coeducational group work that found its institutional framework in the Hanseatic Youth Association (HJB). To members of the HJB, Elisabeth Sülau became known as "Ambrosius," (an affectionate yet deferential reference to St. Ambrose, an early founder of Christianity).

Magda Müller, a mother who had been involved with the welfare authorities and whose son Henry regularly took part in HJB activities from the age of ten,

described her first meeting with Elisabeth Sülau at the HJB (M. Müller 1995, personal communication):

> When Henry went on trips with the HJB, I had to go and apply for a fee rebate or waiver. One time, I spoke to Ambrosius, who was a pretty posh lady, but her heart was in the right place. Her real name was Elisabeth Sülau. She immediately called me *du* [informal form of address], like a friend.

At a time when most people still took it for granted that female social workers were stern figures with buns who wore long, dark, rubber-coated overcoats, Elisabeth Sülau cut a striking figure. As one of her former interns remembered (Kalcher, 1995, p. 97):

> I had never seen anyone like her: big earrings, bright red lips, bracelets, a clunky necklace. The social workers I had previously met neither used makeup nor did they wear conspicuous jewelry. What was also new to me was that a woman lived for her work. She was in the office first thing and frequently the last to leave at night. There was no nine-to-five for her. I never once saw her idle.

By 1955, the Hanseatic Youth Association had grown from the initial group of seven girls to almost 400 members, including nine youth groups and an unspecified number of children's groups, according to the 1955/56 HJB annual report. The organization primarily served young adults between 18 and 25 years of age. Although girls made up a small majority of children who participated in HJB, two thirds of young adult members were men. More than 90% of the group members were either still at school or were "school-leavers" with jobs as craftsmen or laborers. Some 64% of the HBJ members were known to the youth welfare authorities. Of these, the overwhelming majority were subject to voluntary protection orders, later known as "flexible educational support," which mandated regular meetings between the youth and a social worker (Krüger, 1995, pp. 48–49).

Lisel Werninger

Lisel Werninger (1914–2018), a second female social worker, collaborated with Elisabeth Sülau in leading the HJB. No one exerted a more formative influence on the history of social group work in Hamburg than these two women.

During the 1920s, Lisel Werninger was affiliated with the Christian youth movement. On her 100th birthday she revealed a well-kept secret to her guests: Throughout the war she had been a high-ranking official in the BDM – the Nazi organization for girls and young women – and supervised all the residential homes for young women undertaking their year of compulsory national service that were located on the German Baltic coast. In the early 1940s, Lisel Werninger was granted permission to embark on a teacher training course with the educationalist Peter

Petersen at the university in Jena. Petersen was a controversial figure, given his National Socialist entanglements, but his Jena Plan concept for group-based education in schools is still widely recognized. In 1946, Werninger was among the first students at the Protestant Seminary for Social Professions in Kassel whose principal, Fides von Gontard, greatly impressed her. Werninger's subsequent professional internship with Elisabeth Sülau in Hamburg further amplified her career-long commitment to social group work. As she remembererd (Werninger, 1995, personal communication):

> I encountered the potential of the group experience, both positive and negative, when I met Elisabeth Sülau. When she was a social worker in St. Georg in 1947, she observed the youngsters on the streets. She famously took the first seven girls with her to her flat. She assumed that you had to take young people as you found them, talk to them and expose yourself to their problems and concerns in order to facilitate new experiences. So she engaged in discussions with them, went on excursions with them, joined them doing all the things open to adolescents and young adults after the war. These famous seven girls eventually became the Hanseatic Youth Association that carried on with roughly 500 members for two decades.
>
> Characteristic for Elisabeth Sülau was her insistence on giving young people the benefit of the doubt. "No matter who you are, when you're here, you are important. I don't care what you did before." On this basis, she developed a form of club life whose participants ranged from preschool kids to young adults and parents.
>
> There was another crucial feature which has never been picked up anywhere else in Hamburg's youth welfare system. Elisabeth Sülau insisted that the individual groups that developed as interest and friendship groups elected their own leaders. This group leader was complemented by an adult adviser who was either a student or a social education professional and who also needed to be chosen by the group. For me, the house of the Hanseatic Youth Association was really a community center. This approach never caught on in Germany.

Both Elisabeth Sülau and Lisel Werninger were familiar with the full spectrum of Christian and non-denominational Weimar-era youth movements. Both women had witnessed the substitution of Nazi authoritarianism for the democratic self-organization of the labor youth organizations and the appalling readiness with which the cult of leadership among the Wandervögel assimilated to the Nazis' Führer principle. Both Sülau and Werninger considered the end of the war a fundamental caesura and hoped that henceforth everything would be different.

The inspiration for the radical change that was now required came primarily from the United States. Some of the exiled or surviving social work and social education scholars and practitioners, including Gisela Konopka and Louis Lowy, returned to teach in Germany after the war, and they brought methods of social work, particularly individualized case work and social group work, that they had developed while in the U.S. Ambitious German social

work trainees and professionals increasingly went to the U.S. to acquire relevant skills (Müller, 1988).

Gisela Konopka (1910–2003), who was able to flee to the U.S. on the eve of the Second World War, was a prominent proponent of this new approach. "And then Hamburg," she reported in her memoirs, "where they had thrown me into a Gestapo dungeon; but it was also here that I had joined other Jews and non-Jews in resisting the Nazis. Now I met Elisabeth Sülau and we felt like sisters" (Konopka, 1996, p. 11).

Democracy in action

"Life outside was tough, but in the HJB you had a breathing space": Christel Gasterstaedt (1995) used this quotation as the title for her edited collection on the work of HJB. My own respondents agreed. During the 1990s, I asked Jürgen Kalcher, then a colleague of mine at the State School of Social Work in Hamburg, and Gesa von Bentivegni, who was concerned with the welfare authority's social education training and professional development, about the social group work of the Hanseatic Youth Association. Both Jürgen Kalcher and Gesa von Bentivengni had undertaken their professional internships in the 1950s under the supervision of Elisabeth Sülau, and they remembered her as a remarkable instructor. Gesa von Bentivegni (1995, personal communication) recounted her experiences as an adviser adopted by one of the HBJ groups:

> The basic idea was that the youngsters elected their own group leaders and that we, the so-called experts, who were social workers or some other kind of professional, had an advisory role. The youngsters formed friendship and interest groups. Each group needed a professional but decided itself who that would be. This was extremely unusual, and I was awfully proud when I was chosen.
>
> The group members often knew each other because they lived in the same neighborhoods. But they were also referred by education counselors, youth welfare officers, and social workers when they realized that they were not getting through to the youngsters and wanted them to have a good experience for a change. They then transferred the youngsters' protection orders and files to the HJB—this was always a bureaucratic process.
>
> We were tasked with what one would today call an educational support measure. But we no more cared about this side of things than the kids did. Our professional goals were democratic empowerment, the promotion of education, and the provision of counseling. Sure, sometimes all this happened only on paper, but sometimes it was also a reality. The development of durable and robust democratic structures whose reach extended beyond our dealings with the specific youngsters who were referred to us was a goal we wholeheartedly embraced.
>
> This was democracy in action—the elected group leaders were able to rely on the advisers as a sort of fallback option when they didn't know what to do, but they and the group

> members were ultimately in charge. Just telling them, "No," was pointless. I really needed to convince them—which I was usually able to do.

Kalcher (1995, personal communication) also stressed the democratic basis of social group work at HJB:

> We had what I would call a dual leadership structure: the advisor working alongside the leader, who was elected by the group itself. The tension inherent in this structure was always real; it was consciously played out, quite intentionally. The group leaders came together for regular sessions to discuss specific problems and agree on joint activities. The professional social educators also held meetings. These gatherings were like supervisions run by Ambrosius [Elisabeth Sülau] or other full-time colleagues.
>
> Above all, Ambrosius wanted to create attachments. "Create attachments!" was her quintessential slogan. When the creation of a new group was being considered, this would be announced at one of these open evenings to which roughly three times as many individuals would be invited as might form the prospective group.

Krüger (1995, p. 33) described the open process for recruiting new members as leading to "an almost ideal composition of the groups":

> The groups brought youngsters with a range of issues—ranging from criminal conduct, aggressiveness, and suicidal ideation to social contact dysfunction and anxiety—together with "well-adjusted" and goal-oriented adolescents and young adults with "normal" response patterns and pronounced communicative competence. Within the groups and the whole association, this created manifold identification and learning opportunities conducive to tolerant and responsible conduct. Since the youngsters' issues and problematic track records were not revealed, each of them was given an opportunity to make a fresh start.

The unusual constellation of self-regulation and self-organization within a professional framework shaped not only the general atmosphere of HJB but also the way in which participants dealt with controversies and conflicts. As explained by Krüger (995, p. 21):

> The experiential and practice space of HJB was no mere playpen; it was an eminently serious undertaking. Consequently, the socio-emotional echo the youngsters encountered in response to their "public" activities and conduct in the club was not merely a didactical gesture but profoundly meaningful. Participants learned that they were genuinely needed, but also that criticism of their conduct and the sanctions that might result could have palpable consequences. (Krüger, 1995, p. 21)

Kalcher (1995, personal communication) was impressed by the democratic procedures for resolving conflicts in the HJB:

> The group parliament and the group court were important institutions. In the parliament, each member, including Ambrosius and the other employees and volunteers, had one vote. Among the tasks of the group court was the reinstatement of former members. It frequently had to concern itself with brawls, say, between boys who had only recently joined. Short of involving the police, the employees had no choice but to exclude the brawlers. These situations could be quite perilous. Once the dust had settled, those who,

on further consideration, felt they had been treated unjustly were able to launch an appeal with the group court. The group court consisted of adolescents and young adults, but the judge was usually a former member of staff. Appellants were able to draw on one or more of their peers for their defense. The most far-reaching sanction was suspension, say, for three weeks. I still have a letter here from Ambrosius:

"Dear Jürgen, we need to convene the group court and I would like to ask you to be the impartial judge. Two boys, Willi and Jürgen, have been suspended from the home for three weeks because, on balance, we have reason to assume that they set a poster alight which led to fire damage." The boys had been informed in writing that the group court would hear their appeal if they objected to the sanction. Maintaining their innocence, they had indeed appealed the decision and were now waiting for the group court to adjudicate.

I can't actually remember what happened and what we did in this particular case. There were many cases like this, and I can only reiterate that the court was genuinely a participatory institution of the kind many now call for as though the idea were brand new. Between 1947 and 1967, it was a reality at the HJB.

The demise of the HJB

In Germany, a clear distinction between youth welfare (*Jugendfürsorge*, concerned principally with foster and residential care) and youth services more generally (*Jugendpflege*) was established in the 1920. The latter youth services covered both youth associations, including denominational organizations and the Scouts, and institutions such as youth centers and community centers that are open to young people regardless of their background and affiliation.

What is particularly striking about the HJB is the way that it straddled what were previously considered irreconcilable structural contradictions. Initially created to implement individualized child protection measures, the HJB became a significant player in both youth welfare and open youth services. HJB staff acted on the behest of the youth authority and independent sponsors. Although leadership positions, such as those of Elisabeth Sülau and Christel Gasterstaedt, were funded by the municipality, the HJB relied almost entirely on private donations for the funding of the center and its activities. The social group work that was its principal focus proved perfectly compatible with a range of democratic self-organization initiatives and neighborhood as well as city-wide interventions.

Given the sophistication and complexity of the undertaking, Elisabeth Sülau's retirement in 1965 posed a considerable challenge. The HJB was further weakened when another leader, Christel Gasterstaedt, took up a lectureship at the School of Social Work. Staff turnover increased with changes in senior management, and in 1967, the HJB was dissolved and its building was sold.

The principal reason for the relatively sudden termination of the HJB, I would argue, lay in the fact that those responsible for youth services were no longer willing to grapple with the tensions the HJB had straddled so successfully: between private and public, between self-organization and professional guidance, between working and leisure time, between social distance and the principle of equality, between authoritarian leadership and democratic self-determination, between "normality" and "deviation," between youth welfare and open youth services, between public and private sponsorship, between social group work and complex, community-based practices.

These tensions were ostensibly resolved by a one-sided clinical professionalization process that separated the methods of youth welfare and open youth services. Social group work was reduced to its purely therapeutic dimension and officially renamed "therapeutic social group work." Anything more readily accessible and open-ended became the purview of the youth clubs and community centers. As stated by Gesa von Bentivegni (1995, personal communication), "There may have been many limited follow-up projects in practice and numerous interesting experiments in the field of social group work, but none of them returned to the principle of self-organization."

As further explained by Kalcher (1995, personal communication):

> Social group work was turned into socio-*therapeutic* group work. What had been a means of social education was now deployed therapeutically. This was the time when social education professionals began to seek out psychoanalytical and various other forms of therapy and increasingly modelled themselves on psychologists. It was not least for this reason that social group work ultimately petered out in the 1980s. I would still maintain, however, that work with small groups is as crucial to social education today as it ever was.

Social group work of the kind pioneered by the Hanseatic Youth Association was predicated on the mutual recognition of all parties as equals, on a notion of equality that unconditionally acknowledged the inherent worthiness of each and every individual. As a result, HJB could accommodate individual difference, extravagance, idiosyncrasy and quirkiness, and cope with contradictions and conflicts. Persons were not viewed from a social distance or categorized in terms of their deviation from specific norms.

Mannschatz (2010) described the principle of "situational equality" for all group members who are jointly engaged in a task. Once this principle of equality was abandoned, so too was the ability to cope with the tensions and complexities underlying the HJB. The process of clinical professionalization established a social distance between professionals and clients. Any form of close contact was considered taboo, a violation of professional boundaries and professional ethics. In contrast to the self-organization of groups by HJB members, professional social workers and educators now selected group members and they held group activities during regularly scheduled office

hours. Social workers prioritized their skills in diagnosing disorders and deficits that clients were supposedly unable to overcome under their own steam, given their affliction by those disorders and deficits. Social group work became the preserve of those concerned with youth welfare and juvenile delinquency, while open youth services went to the youth clubs and community centers. Participatory approaches to social group work disappeared for many years.

From Social Group Work to Mobile Youth Work

After the demise of the HJB, Lisel Werninger was able to continue a reduced form of social group work. She was tasked with the implementation of social group work in seven Hamburg districts, focusing specifically on so-called social flashpoints. Her office was also responsible for the city in its entirety and by the end of the 1970s, uniquely in Germany, 32 full-time positions for social group workers had been created in Hamburg. Yet this was a very different kind of social group work geared to the professional distinctions between the social work methods of individual case work, group work, and community-based work. Any suggestion of self-organization and self-regulation had been erased, and group membership was not self-selected but assigned. The prioritization of professional distance and therapeutic approaches also bled into the social relations underpinning social group work. The notion of fundamental equality was replaced by a concept of professional superiority; the clients' real-world competence was subordinated to professional expertise.

Lisel Werninger's retirement in 1980 brought further radical change to social group work in Hamburg. Werninger's office was closed, and the social group work positions were devolved to the aforementioned seven districts. This initiated a decline that continued well into the 1990s. Whenever positions in the social services were cut, the social group workers were at the top of the list. Soon, only a handful of the 32 positions remained.

By the 1980s, owing in no small measure to the impact of the HJB, the number of children committed to residential care in Hamburg had decreased to such an extent that few children's homes were still operating at capacity. Large children's homes were disbanded in favor of smaller, community-based accommodations. At this juncture, it would have been possible to build on the legacy of the HJB by devising new forms of decentralized, social group work for children and youth in specific neighborhoods and social spaces.

In 1986, the welfare authority issued new guidelines for mobile youth work, however the guidelines were planned without consultation with professionals in the field. Not surprisingly, the plans for mobile youth work were met with defensiveness, resistance, and mutual recriminations between those who favored clinical models of social work and those who advocated for

community-based approaches. The opportunity to adopt a community, social-space approach to social group work was squandered, and the various fields of social work practice were more divided than ever before.

Ironically, the possibility of a more comprehensive rejuvenation of social group work in Hamburg was foreclosed in 1990, when new legislation on children's services placed social group work on a statutory footing. Some German states interpreted the new statutes liberally to give greater priority to social group work practice. In Hamburg, however, social group work had ceased almost entirely. The welfare authorities were not interested in supporting social group work despite the relative cost-effectiveness of group work projects in the 1970s and the economies resulting from the reduced need for residential care.

Implications for the future

The current statutory framework poses two basic problems for the revival of social group work in Germany today. First, social group work is defined as a specialist method for the treatment of clients with advanced needs, for "difficult" children referred by social services on the basis of their "disorder" "behavioural problems," or "unmanageability." It is, in short, socially exclusive. Secondly, despite efforts to coordinate the various statutory education support measures at the neighborhood level, neighborhood programs have become increasingly divorced from one another.

If one agrees that social group work is the single most important form of social work – not in the sense of group work as an official discipline and statutory professional activity, but rather in the sense of working on and with society – then one can only conclude that social group work urgently needs to be salvaged from the methodological reductionism that has prevailed for the last three decades. Social group work must be based on a new generic approach. To this end it may be helpful to review social group work's key foundational contexts.

Louis Lowy (1920–1991), who is still one of the most frequently cited authorities on social group work, first implemented his approach as a prisoner in the Terezín ghetto, where he developed a form of social and cultural group work that used theater to accommodate children and adolescents who were denied a regular education in the camp. The Nazi authorities, who could conceive of education only in the form of teacher-centered classrooms, took no exception (Gardella, 2011; Wieler & Zeller, 1995). That said, education was not Louis Lowy's only concern. Group work raised possibilities for social and political participation (Freire, 1970) and prepared participants for democracy by respecting the dignity and worth of the individual and by assuring members that their contribution to the group was worthwhile (Lowy, 1955, pp. 13–14). In Lowy's words, "the group can provide what the ego

needs – hope and a sense of the future (Lowy, 1985, p. 281; Gardella, 2011, p. 33). Lowy's s perspective was reflected in the insight of Bettelheim (1974, p. 255): "While social solidarity alone makes individuation safe, personal uniqueness, which tends to define itself in contrast to others, threatens solidarity . . . We feel secure to the degree we feel important to those who are significant in our lives."

Hans Falck (1923–2014), like Gisela Konopka, had escaped from Nazi Germany to become a leading social worker in the U.S. In his compelling book, *Social Work: The Membership Perspective* (Falck, 1988), Hans Falck asserted that belonging to social groups is synonymous with being human. According to Falck's membership perspective, social work must take individuals' manifold social relations and networks for its point of departure (Falck, 1988; Kunstreich, 2022). It is social group work, properly conceived, that takes this insight seriously and has the capacity to facilitate new forms of membership, to secure and strengthen relationships that already exist, and to identify and foster social settings that support people's needs. It is social group work that transcends the methodological divides between individual case work and community-based social work; provides for social, educational, and political fulfillment; and offers the possibility of equality and hope for all participants in groups.

Translated by Lars Fischer

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