Article

Bildung, capabilities, human freedom and human flourishing: impulses for social work

by

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Abstract

There is international interest in approaches to social work focussing on human development and service users' real freedoms to act. One such example, established in social work, is the capabilities approach. This paper introduces a related, but internationally less well-known concept from German-language philosophy of education discourses, *Bildung.* It argues that *Bildung* represents a valuable additional framework for understanding social work in terms of human growth and human flourishing.

The concept of *Bildung* has taken many forms. The term's changing notions are sketched, starting from its late enlightenment-period origins. Two particular variants are highlighted: the original 18th-century *Bildung*, which focussed on helping the individual reach a state of agency and *Mündigkeit* (maturity), a late 20th-century critical theory-influenced *Bildung*, which focussed on the relationship between the growth of the individual and the society of which they are part. A brief consideration of the capabilities approach provides a context for this discussion of *Bildung*, with parallels to the capabilities approach noted in the course of outlining *Bildung* theories. It is suggested that due to their shared tenets, both variants of *Bildung* can be seen a single concept, one with a strong conceptual closeness to the capabilities approach.

When applied to social work, *Bildung* suggests a shift away from thinking about the person in terms of utilities and outcomes, towards instead an understanding of a person's humanness in their freedom to choose their own path and become the author of their own life. To conclude, consequences for a *Bildung*-informed social work are considered. Four are highlighted: the role of the social worker stimulating the service user's dispositions in the context of their social environment; shifting to a relationship-oriented practice, centring on direct work; utilizing community settings in practice and the importance of refraining from using guidance, persuasion and coercion.

Keywords

Bildung, capabilities, Germany, critical theory, social pedagogy, human growth

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Introduction

It may be proposed that social work, wherever practised and however defined, is concerned with maximizing individuals' well-being and ability to function in the contextual environments that they find themselves in (IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) & IASSW (International Association of Schools of Social Work), 2014). Such a perspective suggests that approaches which investigate human flourishing offer valuable ways forward. This draws the focus to supporting human development by inculcating capabilities. Accordingly, the capabilities approach (Sen, 1993) is becoming internationally established in the social professions (Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022). However, this paper proposes a further, internationally underappreciated concept as a useful alternative to it: *Bildung*. This concept dates back to late enlightenment-period philosophy in the German-speaking countries. Like the capabilities approach, it addresses human growth, and examines human beings' freedoms, agency and abilities to shape the world around them (Andersen, 2020).

This paper suggests applying *Bildung* to social work theory-building with a human agency and human freedom orientation. It is structured as follows. First, to anchor the discussion, the application of the capabilities approach to social work will be briefly sketched and reviewed. Given that *Bildung* rarely enters Anglophone social welfare discourses and is less familiar, this second concept will then be presented in more detail. An overview of *Bildung*'s historical development will present the shifting focus the concept has taken since its conception. Given that this represents two-and-a-half centuries of conceptual development (for a more detailed English-language overview, see Horlacher, 2016), our sketch will necessarily remain an incomplete picture, examining variants of *Bildung* especially relevant to the social professions. Two specific forms of the concept will be highlighted in particular: the original 18th-century Enlightenment understanding, shaped by political liberalism (Humboldt, 1792/2009, 1793/2000), and a late 20th-century variant, influenced by critical theory (Klafki, 1985, 1990, 2000, 2007). Störtländer (2018) regards the latter, Klafki's (2007, p. 83) 'critical-constructive' variant of *Bildung*, as particularly close to the capabilities approach. Parallels between *Bildung* (in both its late 18th and late 20th-century forms) and the capabilities approach will be noted. This will suggest potential

transfers to social work, and this paper concludes by examining concrete ways in which *Bildung*-informed social work may differ from traditional practice.

The capabilities approach in the social professions

Sen's (1999, p. 18) invitation to pay attention to '…the expansion of the "capabilities" of persons to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value' has led to a relative abundance of English-language social work literature utilizing the capabilities approach (Saleeby, 2006; Carlson et al., 2016; Gupta, 2017; van Raemdonck & Seedat-Khan, 2018; Slabbert, 2018; Veal et al., 2018; Reynaert et al., 2019; Strømland, 2024; see the comprehensive scoping review by Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022). The capabilities approach has of course also shaped the social professions outside the Anglophone countries. In the German-speaking world, it has impacted not only on social work (Röh, 2013), but also other disciplines concerned with children and young people (Graf et al., 2013), such as social pedagogy (Mührel et al., 2017) and education (Otto & Ziegler, 2006).

Sen's (1999) initial articulation of the core principles of a capabilities approach can be distilled and applied directly to social work practice: a) people differ in their use of resources and the ability to employ resources is as important as considering resources themselves; b) while people adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves, and may evaluate harsh circumstances in a way that does not reflect that which a neutral observer external to their situation might take – in social work both subjective and objective perspectives are important; c) assessing whether people are taking up options to enhance their wellbeing when those options are present is also important, as are the reasons behind these choices; d) social work takes place in complex circumstances with complex motivations underlying situations and social workers seeking to negotiate that complexity.

Sen (1980, 1993, 1999) and Nussbaum (2009, 2011) are most closely associated with the wider development of the capabilities approach which, in simple terms, considers the moral significance of people's capability to live a good life, something, therefore, that echoes the virtue ethics of Aristotle (Hugman et al., 2021), intersects with Maslowian and, perhaps, Rogerian self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; Rogers,

1951), and chimes with social work's drive towards a Rawlsian social justice and human rights approach (Banerjee, 2012; Wronka, 2023). Despite criticisms of the capabilities approach as reflecting a Western liberal model, Nussbaum (2009, 2011) indicates that the capabilities approach is flexible and represents something that can be developed and adapted to local situations and contexts; it is fluid and open-ended, and is not meant to be rigid in its application. Gupta (2017) challenges the association with (neo)liberal approaches, and this suggests that when aligned with Nancy Fraser's (2023) critical evaluations of capitalism in the context of care, it lends itself to the development of critical social work practice. Moreover, despite being represented as a normative model, Evans (2017) argues for its invigorating and challenging potential in both practice and education while focussing on advocacy and well-being. This is somewhat akin to Banerjee's (2012) promotion of the capabilities approach as a spiritually-sensitive form of social work.

The development of social work capabilities must consider the personal, organizational, social and political resource capacity of those involved in social work, whether social worker, their employing organization, or the person, family, group or community they are working with (Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022). Thus, in a social work assessment, it is not just the moral stance and focus on human rights, social justice and wellbeing taken by the social worker that is important, but also the organizational focus and resources, as well as the socio-political deployment of those resources within that particular area, region or country (Amezcua-Aguilar & Espadas-Alcázar, 2023). Within social work, a focus on the capabilities of those being assessed to utilize available resources, and an understanding of the choices they wish to make, is central (Den Braber, 2013). So, the social worker assessing a person's needs must question whether there are sufficient resources available to meet those needs. The practitioner must challenge the moral rectitude of insufficient or misdirected resources in their organizations and society at large. At the same time, they must examine the individual's capacity for using resources to enhance their wellbeing, and act accordingly to increase skills. They must respect choices without apportioning moral blame to those making choices that do not enhance their wellbeing or, even, run counter to it (Belda-Miquel, 2022; Parker, 2025).

There is diversity in the social work applications of the capabilities approach. Saleeby (2006) reports its utility in assessing what a person is able to do in their environment, rather than judging against normative standards, which allows for the tailoring of personalized plans that have more relevance to the individual. Van Raemdonck and Seedat-Khan (2018) examine the lives of street children in terms of capabilities. Slabbert (2018) describes the utilization of a capabilities approach in assessing service user wellbeing and developing this as a learning tool in the classroom, whereas Veal et al. (2018) take knowledge of the approach further to challenge contemporary depoliticized visions of social work, as the focus on capability/capabilities reintroduces structure and environment as determinants of inequalities (see also Gupta, 2017). Strømland (2024) utilizes it to consider children's actual participation in the child welfare decisions that impact on their lives. In social work education, the capabilities approach offers both a human rights focus (Reynaert et al., 2019) and a social justice focus (Carlson et al., 2016). In the German-speaking countries, alongside practice-based applications (Graf et al., 2013), the capabilities approach has also been employed to develop social work theory. Theory approaches centred on the service user's 'leading their life' (*Lebensführung*) are currently enjoying popularity (Wirth, 2015) and Röh (2013) outlines a capabilities-based life control model. In effect, his theory-building overlaps in its practice conclusions with social developmental Anglo-Saxon perspectives (Veal et al., 2018), in that it leads to two roles for social professionals: supporting service users to maximize their internal capabilities, and advocacy work and campaigning, so that service users' socioeconomic environment is a capability-enhancing one. Otto and colleagues' extensive utilization of the framework to the social professions (Otto & Ziegler, 2010) can be understood in the context of their objection to early 21st-century technocratic, outcomes-oriented professionalization discourses in social work, such as managerialism, 'best' practice and evidence-based practice (Otto et al., 2009). Their objective has thus been supporting an alternative professionalization discourse with a quite different evaluative metric: an emancipatory social work framework, with an orientation on service users' self-determination (Glücks & Ziegler, 2020; Otto & Ziegler, 2017). This is akin to European participation and narrative-based approaches that focus on 'experts by experience' (Jones & Pietilä, 2020; Lindström & Rantanen, 2021).

Otto and Ziegler (2006) and Andresen et al. (2010) suggest the capabilities approach can be seen as an educational approach. Their analysis is perhaps most interesting taking 'educational' with reference to German-language literature, due to two interesting peculiarities of 'education' in the German-speaking world. Firstly, the German discipline of 'education' extends way beyond questions of schooling, stretching out to all areas of informal and formal learning and growth. Indeed, for much of the 20th century, education/pedagogy was a formal umbrella discipline for the care disciplines/professions, due to the dominance of social pedagogy. This has no longer been the case since the late 20th century, as social work (*Soziale Arbeit*) has asserted itself as an autonomous academic discipline (*Wissenschaft*) (Frampton, 2022). Nonetheless, the notion that social work has a significant pedagogic/educational component remains contemporary, rather than historic in Germany. Otto and colleagues' use of capabilities can therefore be considered social work/social pedagogy theory-building. Secondly, behind their English-language contrast of capabilities and education lies a much more interesting juxtaposition: that of the capabilities approach and the German-language philosophical tradition of *Bildung* (a more complex and specific educational concept, not translatable as 'education' when used in its enlightenment and critical theory senses). It is this context (Andresen et al., 2010) that this paper builds on, as will become clear in the next section which outlines the historical evolution of *Bildung* in the German-speaking countries.

Humboldt and 18th-century Bildung: Developing one's powers, developing one's capabilities

The term *Bildung* has its etymology in theological concepts in the middle ages, but evolved in the German-speaking countries most rapidly in the 18th-century late Enlightenment period (Horlacher, 2016). Its arrival coincided with what seemed to be a dissolution of the rigid structural social distinctions of the past: the growth of secularism and new personal freedoms. The conceptual starting point of *Bildung* is often taken to be Kant's (1784/2009) concept of *Mündigkeit* (maturity). Maturity expresses an ideal of an adult human being, able to use reason to understand their world and freely, rationally and morally act within it. This leads to considerations of the processes by which a person can be nurtured in their growth. German social

work, and especially social pedagogy, has drawn on analyses of these processes, and the German social professions would be defined with reference to the idea of supporting the person to become a self-determining individual (Frampton, 2024).

Bildung can be seen as a process of formation and cultivation. While *Bildung* may, in a person's youth, be led by others (family and educators), the term primarily denotes an essentially self-led reflective process: the *Bildung* of the self (*Selbstbildung*). A person must come to *Bildung* by themselves, voluntarily, by their own self-activity and exertion, in the course of living their life (*Lebensführung*). For Germans, no theorist developed this formative idea of *Bildung* more famously than Wilhelm von Humboldt (1793/2000). The basis of Humboldt's liberal Enlightenment conceptualization of *Bildung* was a Kantian vision of the human being striving to be a subject. In order to achieve this, a process of self-formation was required. Humboldt's *Bildung* was centred on the person experiencing cultivating situations, each bringing its own opportunity for growth.

Three clear parallels to the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017) become visible here. Firstly, like the values that each of us uses in shaping our lives following the capabilities approach, *Bildung* is necessarily plural: each individual will value the many separate aspects of their *Bildung* differently, having contrasting priorities for their own development. This makes the choices of *Bildung* multi-dimensional, similar in complexity to selecting which of one's capabilities to augment. Secondly, as with the capabilities view of the human being, the development within *Bildung* does not serve external ends, but instead sets a path to a human being fulfilling their own human potentials. Humboldt thus interprets Kant's (1784/2009) idea of the human being themselves as the end:

> The true end of Man … is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. (Humboldt, 1792/2009, p. 16)

Thirdly, as becomes apparent in this citation, Humboldt was seeing *Bildung* as of a formation of the individual's 'powers'. It was a process of cultivation of the self, of 'self-development' (Humboldt, 1792/2009, p. 17), or of 'human development' (Humboldt, 1792/2009, p. 51), of man 'endeavouring to increase and diversify the powers with which he works' (Humboldt, 1792/2009, p. 16). It is thus argued that

Humboldt's 'powers' can be loosely equated with 'capabilities', as understood by Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (1999).

Bildung can only be understood with reference to the political philosophy of liberalism, and like the capabilities approach, the development of one's powers is tied to the concept of human freedom. 'Freedom is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes' (Humboldt, 1792/2009, p. 16), and *Bildung,* in turn, leads to the freedoms of the self-determining individual being attained. Like in the capabilities approach, *Bildung* offers freedom from relationships of power, structural violence and coercion: removing 'unfreedoms' (Sen, 1999, p. 8). Both approaches, *Bildung* and the capabilities approach, place human beings as active shapers of their own development within their social environment. This recalls Barnes' (2000, p. 25, *italics in original*) understanding of agency:

> For an individual to possess agency is for her to possess internal powers and capacities, which, through their exercise, make her an *active* entity constantly intervening in the course of events ongoing around her.

Already in the late Enlightenment, the learning opportunities of classical, humanistic *Bildung* were not only seen from a cognitive/intellectual perspective. Considerable attention was given to aesthetics and play in *Bildung* (Schiller, 1795/2016), thereby drawing attention to the feeling/sensing aspect of personal development. In works of art and culture, the interplay of the individual subjective experience and the shared, collective human experience brings together the individual and the universal. This interest in the cultural component of *Bildung*, in Germany understood as '*ästhetische Bildung*' (Dietrich et al., 2013; Frampton et al., 2023), has been retained to this day, and has firmly anchored arts-based methods in the social professions. This is not dissimilar to the ludic focus taken by Winnicott and interpolated into UK social work (Winnicott, 1971; Parker, 2023). The social pedagogy tradition nurtures the development of both aesthetic taste and expressive creativity in group pedagogic activities, comparable to capabilities scholars' interest in cultural community development approaches (Zitcer et al., 2016). Störtländer (2018) regards Nussbaum's (2010) view of a liberal arts education as being in the tradition of *Bildung*, and he maps her arguments on the humanities and a meaningful life to specific human development-based *Bildung* capabilities.

Dead ends and new starts: Klafki, critical theory and the societal dimension of 20th-century *Bildung*

Bildung is a concept born of the liberal Enlightenment, but by the time of social work's 20th-century development, the term's meaning had changed. In 19th-century Germany, *Bildung* metamorphosed into a marker of membership of the bourgeoisie, in German, the *Bildungsbürgertum,* the educated classes (Horlacher, 2016, pp. 64–68). Nineteenth-century German *Bildung* had become strangely non-political in orientation, and had lost its original emancipatory character (Koselleck, 1990). New ideas of *Bildung* followed at the turn of the century. A seminal early social pedagogy theory by philosopher-educationalist Paul Natorp (1899/1974) utilized *Bildung* in a model of community child-raising. Natorp was linking *Bildung* and the social, and this cultivation was no longer politically contextualized by individualistic liberalism, but rather by collectivist ideas. Natorp's successor in the social pedagogy canon, Herman Nohl (1935/1982), shared the notion of education being a group, and not an individual matter, but in the poisonously nationalistic climate of the Third Reich, this was racialized as the education of the ethnic German people. Such misappropriations of *Bildung* (or its sister concept *Erziehung*, child-raising) for undemocratic purposes, and for exclusion (Frampton, 2024), provide a sobering reminder that caution must be exercised when using the term. A non-critical or Romanticism-based *Bildung* is especially vulnerable to popularist ideologies attempting to manufacture racist/nationalist senses of group identification (Lorenz 1994; Tröhler, 2003).

An important re-working of *Bildung* in Germany occurred in the wake of the events of 1968. The new social movements demanded immediate citizen participation in processes of social transformation: *Bildung* was central to this (Miethe & Roth, 2016). Historical questions were raised concerning the responsibility for the systematic oppression of women and minority groups, with the need to reflect on the Holocaust becoming urgent (Adorno, 1966/2003; Lorenz, 1994). A foundation for the re-thinking of *Bildung* had been tentatively made by Horkheimer (1953, pp. 20–21), who retained the emancipatory orientation of the liberal *Bildung* concept, but embedded it in society: *'Bildung* is *Bildung* of the external whole, as much as of the person themselves. No one is educated, who, in their passion for their own causes, fails to recognize their connection with the whole (…)'. In a famous series of radio interviews,

Adorno and Becker (1969/1999, p. 21) observed how the *Bildung* 'of each individual in political, social and moral awareness' is a basis for democracy. However, they also revisited Kant's ideas on immaturity, and were concerned that people were being lulled into immaturity by the heteronomy of contemporary social arrangements, including social institutions. They concluded that 'whether and how one can work against this' was the key question for maturity. 'Horkheimer and Adorno's perspectives on the dialectic relationship of the individual and society influenced the critical educationalist Klafki. Determined to not abandon ***Bildung's*** theoretical roots, he underlined classical *Bildung*'s central premise:

> *Bildung* is understood as a qualification for reasonable self-determination, which presupposes and includes emancipation from determination by others. It is a qualification for autonomy, for freedom of individual thought, and for individual moral decisions. (Klafki, 2000, p. 87)

Classical *Bildung* had been primarily concerned with the individual. Klafki (1985, p. 17) brought liberal *Bildung* up-to-date by adding two complementary democratic objectives to this focus on nurturing individual self-determination: supporting the ability to participate in collective societal co-determination, and developing *Solidaritätsfähigkeit*, the capacity for solidarity with others. In doing so, he shifted the focus from the individual to the collective component of *Bildung*. Such considerations recall Nussbaum's (2011, pp. 34, 39) 'architectonic' central capability of 'affiliation', stressing the salience of association. They also address the promotion of collective capabilities (Ibrahim, 2017).

Klafki (1990) returned to the Enlightenment suggestion that despite the plurality of the paths *Bildung* led to, one's *Bildung* might have a universal core general educational component, particularly in childhood/youth. Previously, general education had been seen as a foundation for future individual academic learning, but Klafki's *Allgemeinbildung* was a democratic education addressing pressing human concerns:

> *Allgemeinbildung* means in this sense the gaining of a historically mediated consciousness of the central problems of the present, and – as far as foreseeable – insight into the shared responsibility we all have in the face of these problems, and a readiness to participate in the challenge of tackling them. (Klafki, 1990, p. 95)

Discussing the cognitive aspect to *Bildung*, Klafki shared the critical theorists' concerns regarding the growth of instrumental rationality in modernity. Aware that the rationalities of science, politics and economics were here to stay, he proposes the promotion of reflective reasoning in *Bildung* to counteract them robustly:

> … instrumental rationality, the faculty of understanding, must be contained by a comprehensive, reflexive theoretical and practical ('practical' in the Kantian sense of ethical) rationality, a rationality which questions the presuppositions and consequences, and therefore the accountability of instrumental rationality and its translation in instrumental-technical, administrative or political-strategic action. As is well known, in contrast to a simple active understanding, Kant termed this reflexive rationality 'reason'. (Klafki, 1990, p. 91)

Here, Klafki's argumentation resembles Nussbaum (2011, pp. 34, 39) in stressing practical reason's particular 'architectonic' importance as a multiplier of capabilities.

Klafki (1985, p. 21) distances himself from traditional school curriculum components, and almost turns *Allgemeinbildung* into a social pedagogic task, suggesting what Anglo-Saxons might consider a broad combination of social education and civic education, tied to the 'key problems' of the 'epoch' (Friesenhahn, 2014). He cites, for instance, peace education, the environment, social equality, globalization issues and sexuality and relationships (Klafki, 1985, p. 21). A clear weakness of Klafki's curriculum is the question of who determines the 'key problems' of the epoch, and, with reference to critical-constructive pedagogies, how. If school is the setting for this curriculum, school teachers may find themselves in a paternalistic role (Meyer & Meyer, 2007; Störtländer, 2019), and the same danger faces social workers. Nonetheless the very existence of such a contemporary 'key issue' curriculum aspect to *Bildung* demonstrates that while Enlightenment-period *Bildung* failed to directly address collective social justice questions, late 20th-century *Bildung* was primarily oriented on them. An individual's *Bildung* is their preparation for living in a socially-just society, and the existence of a collective *Bildung*, that is, the social education of the population, is a precondition for that society.

Such reconfigurations of the objectives of *Bildung* have been echoed by other critical theory-influenced authors attempting to articulate *Bildung*'s purpose. Writing about child-raising (*Erziehung*), but clearly from a *Bildung* perspective, Löwisch discussed its role in cultivating:

> (…) cognition of the embedding of the individual in society (…); cognition of the necessary commitment of the individual to the society and of the practising of this responsibility (…); cognition of the necessity of emancipatory reason for the individual from all coercion, which hinder or overwhelm the ultimate purpose of child-raising: the realization of the human reason of the individual and of society (…). (Löwisch, 1974, pp. 94–95)

Such *Bildung*-theorizing belongs to a critical and social justice-oriented strand of liberalism. However, attention must be drawn to a late 20th-century counter-movement, in which *Bildung* in its birth country slowly seemed to morph into a more functional form of education. In political discourse, understandings of *Bildung* increasingly equated it with neoliberal education: adaption via the acquisition of knowledge, competences and employability (Friesenhahn, 2014; Hellgermann, 2018). Parallel to this, neoconservative discourses on *Bildung* questioned its emancipatory agenda (for instance, Bueb, 2006). Such reductionism reminds us that *Bildung*, like capabilities, is a concept vulnerable to instrumentalization. It can be an emancipatory concept, but when institutionalized can also be the opposite, a form of human capital acquisition, serving the preservation of the status quo with all its inequalities and injustices (Heydorn, 1970/1979). Figure 1, below, offers a schematic overview of some of *Bildung*'s changing historical meanings:

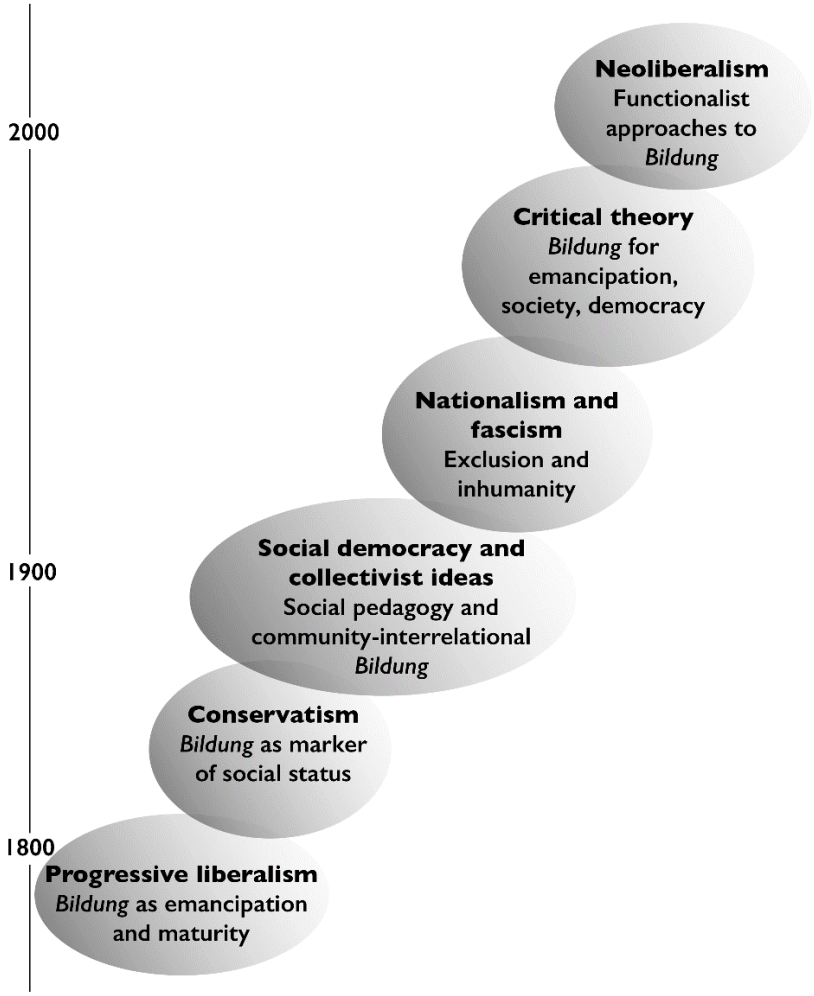

Figure 1: *Bildung:* selected German historical movements showing shifting perspectives

Klafki and Löwisch's notions of *Bildung* retain the original feature of the Enlightenment *Bildung*, the focus on producing the self-determining mature individual. However, they complement it with a whole-system societal approach to contextualizing the individual. *Bildung* is thus more than just an individual's possession of knowledge. Instead, *Bildung* becomes the overarching orientation of one's life in society. In this process, the common good should be a central orientation, respect for the rule of law and the democratic order nurtured, and freedoms passionately advocated for, including minority groups' freedom from oppression. Such a *Bildung* leads to a *Haltung*, a stance shaped by the Kantian faculty of reason, by a sense of responsibility for oneself and for the body social (Friesenhahn, 2014). This concept of *Bildung* carries a critical impulse, which does not simply accept the situation as it is, but instead seeks justifications, legitimation and alternatives. This dialectical connection of individual and society is characteristic for *Bildung*.

Bildung and social work: Perspectives for practice

Just as the capabilities approach can provide practitioners with a fresh orientation considering how to support service users in leading their life, the idea of *Bildung* can inform social work practice. *Bildung* had long been absent in German social work discourses, ignored in favour of the concepts of child-raising or pedagogy (*Erziehung, Pädagogik*). Nevertheless, recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest in *Bildung*, coinciding with changes in the German institutions of early education and school (Otto & Rauschenbach, 2008; Sünker, 1989, 2012; Friesenhahn, 2014, 2020). German interest has also come from social policymakers, in particular when the national *11th Child and Youth Report* initiated a political debate on *Bildung* (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2002). The report's commission issued the *Leipziger Theses* (Bundesjugendkuratorium, Kommission für den Elften Kinder- und Jugendbericht and Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder und Jugendhilfe, 2002), 11 numbered theses addressing inequalities in Germany, many of which promote the role of children's services other than the school system in supporting a broader idea of *Bildung* (Friesenhahn, 2014). This work is being developed here to offer a continental perspective from which social work, as practised in English-speaking countries, can be heuristically re-framed as having a

Bildung perspective. Unlike most of the German considerations mentioned, the application of *Bildung* shall not be restricted to early parts of the human life course: It is argued that the concept is equally useful to conceptualizing adult self-realization. Perspectives for a *Bildung*-informed social work shall be highlighted, each of which echoes capabilities approach discourses.

Bildung-informed social work focuses on stimulating all of the person's dispositions in the context of their social environment

A *Bildung*-informed social work has a personal development orientation, and is founded on the political idea of each and every person socially participating. *Bildung* is concerned with societal action, understood here as social work action on the basis of the faculty of reason. A guiding premise to contextualize this is the idea that each individual has a right to support for the full realization of their personality, as this is a human right (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26). Protecting such a right highlights the political implications of societal conditions. Socioeconomic barriers and power relations must be challenged. Sünker (2003, p. 175), arguing from a social justice perspective, ties *Bildung* to democracy and highlights the role of social movements, old and new, in countering 'colonization, alienation and violence in the various spheres of life'. *Bildung*-informed social work can therefore be categorized alongside radical and critical traditions (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009).

Bildung-informed social work necessitates a relationship-centred practice, in which direct work is done with the service user

European countries, including the UK, are seeing renewed interest in relationship-based/relational social work and strengths perspectives (Cabiati, 2023; Gahleitner, 2017). These provide a basis on which a *Bildung*-informed practice might develop. Relational social work emphasizes decision-making and the quality of relationships, and accords with international social work values and its global definition.

Such a social work practice necessarily involves direct work, rather than simply case management. This may integrate elements of social pedagogy, which has increasing acceptance in some form across much of social work. Methods may involve music, theatre, photography, creative writing, dance, art (Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019), sport

(Lawson, 2005) or outdoor education (Tucker & Norton, 2013). Such activities are not traditionally part of Anglo-Saxon social work, and some may argue that the attendant practice skills do not currently belong to the social worker competence base. However, there are historical examples of practitioners rapidly developing their skill base, for instance, their competencies in direct work with children when life story work became mandatory in cases of adoption (Hopkirk, 1988).

Mollenhauer (1983/2016, p. 85) notes how problem-solving young children 'produce' meaning in their learning through their self-activity, becoming involved in the world in doing so. This feature of *Bildung* is just as present for the adult finding themselves by learning through experience. As one German theorist observes:

> The human being discovers themselves in a lifeworld, they have to get their bearings in it. They find themselves in resources, in relationships, in roles, and in the parameters of their interpretation. These define them (the human being), and – in processes of appropriation, of examination, of selection and of productive continued development – in it they find a path of their own, their own competences therefore, and therein their own life profile. (Thiersch, 2008, p. 239)

Bildung-informed social work requires community settings and community resources

A challenge for the *Bildung*-informed social worker is finding settings to locate their work. The Anglo-Saxon tradition of case management can lead to brief interventions in locations in which the professional is a guest in the service user's lifeworld (such as their home), or where the service user is a guest in the institutional setting of the office. Neither is conducive to learning. *Bildung*-informed social work requires attention to setting. Its connection of the individual and society leads to a consideration of community and socio-spatial approaches (Spatscheck, 2019).

While the UK Sure Start centres (Eisenstadt, 2011) were not domestically regarded as 'social work', from a continental perspective, and with a broader understanding of what social work is, they represent a classic social work setting for *Bildung*. Both the infants and their parents are in a life phase in which learning experiences are all around them. This openness to experience is the raw material of *Bildung*. Other community settings may be listed: community centres, family centres, arts centres, community and church halls, adult education centres, libraries, museums, youth clubs and other recreational facilities. *Bildung*-informed social work would therefore

lead to a rediscovery of community development, as the individual's self-realization is tied to their community's growth and development.

Bildung-informed social work is founded in human freedom and emancipation, and as such is not compatible with persuasion and coercion

Bildung, at its critical best, like the capabilities approach, is a concept anchored in human freedom. *Bildung* presupposes voluntariness: It takes place in the absence of coercion. Accordingly, those controlling areas of social work – such as protective or safeguarding interventions – leave little space for *Bildung*. At first glance, this might suggest that opportunities for a *Bildung*-informed social work may be limited to exactly those situations in which protective discourses dominate. However, this is not necessarily the case. The case of child welfare illustrates this. Practice situations, which some see as child protection to be addressed by coercive statutory measures, may, given adequate resources for practitioners, be instead treated as cases in which voluntary family services can be used (taking these terms in the sense of Gilbert et al., 2011). While neoliberal political philosophies can lead to social work focussed on reactive interventions, *Bildung*-informed social work is a proactive, human developmental practice. It supports people in low-threshold interventions with their everyday challenges, rather than comprising high-threshold acute interventions.

Rather than the practitioner determining what they see as the best path for their service user's life, *Bildung* (like the capabilities approach) suggests a quite different function: supporting the service user in multiplying their real possibilities for action. In other words, the use of guidance or persuasion (Suoninen & Jokinen, 2005), even when acting in the service user's best interests, become just as problematic as coercion. This finds expression within the 'experts by experience' movement, in which people who use social work services employ their learning-through-lived-experience to guide practitioners in developing possibilities for action and self-realization. This infuses both the capabilities and *Bildung* approaches (Preston-Shoot, 2007; Lindström & Rantanen, 2021). Each person must themselves take their own life decisions, and must be counted as an expert on their own life. However, the process is one which goes even further than self-determination: Each person makes

decisions, whether positive or negative, that shape their future selves. *Bildung* is about the person's right to self-authorship, that is, 'self-making', 'choosing to undergo transformative experiences to discover who they will become' (Akhlaghi, 2023, p. 7).

Conclusion

While *Bildung* is becoming acknowledged as a central component of social pedagogy (Cleary, 2019), this paper is new in also locating it at the heart of social work. It has attempted to demonstrate that *Bildung*-informed social work belongs to the same theory-family tree as a social work informed by the capabilities approach. The capabilities approach has established itself in the social work profession, and we claim *Bildung* offers similar theoretical potential. We argue for social workers adopting a 'critical-constructive' *Bildung*-informed approach (Klafki, 2007, p. 83), based on this concept's closeness to social work orientation points: its foundation in human rights and social justice, its basis in democracy, its insistence on self-determination, empowerment and the autonomy and expertise of the service user. Our argument is for a social work practice that focuses on the agentic learner-in-the-world according to their capabilities. This acknowledges the socio-structural contexts of the person's life, and promotes individual growth and *Mündigkeit* within the life perspective of the individual. We are mindful of the potential for derailing such an approach, and for abuses of powerful theoretical positions such as *Bildung* and the capabilities approach. Yet, when informed by relational social work and strengths-perspectives, these approaches both accord with social work values, and with the social justice, person-focussed mission of the profession.

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