Social Space or the Art of Belonging: The Socio-Spatial Approach in the Field of Residential Facilities for Persons with Disabilities

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Abstract—The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) provides the basis of this study. For all countries which have ratified the convention since its entry into force in 2007, the effective implementation of the requirements often leads to considerable challenges. Furthermore, missing indicators make it difficult to measure progress. Therefore, the aim of the research project is to contribute to analyze the consequences of the implementation process on the inclusion and exclusion conditions for people with disabilities in Germany. Disabled People's Organisations and other associations consider the social space to be relevant for the successful implementation of the CRPD. Against this background, the research project wants to focus on the relationship between a barrier-free access to the social space and the "full and effective participation and inclusion" (Art. 3) of persons with disabilities. The theoretical basis of the study is the sociological theory of social space ("Sozialraumtheorie").

Keywords—Decentralisation, qualitative research, residential facilities, social space.

I. CONTEXT

AS is the case in most countries that ratified the UN Convention on the Rights... (UNCRPD), the German Government and the Länder as well as various social actors and institutions are still in the process of implementing the UNCRPD on the national, regional and international levels. In the meantime, some of the activities initiated towards the implementation of the UNCRPD include the following: on the one hand a number of state employees have been required to participate in professional training on the topic of the UNCRPD [1]. On the other hand, governmental stakeholders are drafting, adopting and publishing action plans or strategy documents with the aim of securing equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. Non-governmental organisations, including Disabled Peoples Organisations, are involved in this process to share their expertise and knowledge. However, the implementation has proven to be slow since stakeholders assume that fundamental changes in anti-discrimination and disability policies are not required. The Federal Government's memorandum of 2008 confirmed that German laws satisfy the requirements of the UNCRPD and that only the implementation of the existing laws should be oriented towards the UNCRPD [2]. Nevertheless, the signatory states are required to submit a report on the implementation of the UNCRPD two years after ratification.

After the ratification of the UNCRPD by Germany in 2011, a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of the UNCRPD in Germany was drafted with the participation of civil society (BRK-Allianz), the responsible Federal Department as well as the Deutsches Institut für Menschrechte [German Human Rights Institute], a monitoring institution. With its catalogue of 242 measures, it represents a comprehensive disability policy strategy to coordinate the implementation of the Convention.

In April 2014, a UN expert commission on the CRPD addressed a list of questions to Germany in the context of the state reviews. With the information thus collected, the state report/NAP was supplemented in August 2014 and in February 2015, the civil society statement was added. The states review took place in March 2015 in Geneva. It highlighted that a few more recommendations were necessary, e.g. in terms of "independent living in the community" (§42b). It was also recommended that "twin-track" structures in the fields of education, housing and work be dismantled and partly abolished (Monitoring Stelle DIM 2015) [1]. Information on the further implementation of recommendations will have to be furnished to the Commission in March 2016 and the next state report is expected in 2019 [1].

With respect to the historical development of public welfare in Germany, offers and structures must be further developed and reorganised. From the end of World War II until the mid-1970s, large residential facilities for different groups of people with specific support needs (persons with disabilities, children or elderly people) were established in the outskirts of German cities. It was assumed that centralised offers were conducive to better support for persons with special needs and the focus was on taking care of individuals. They thus led institutionalised lives cut off from mainstream society. The Independent Living Movement, which emerged around 1962 in the USA and was initiated by persons with disabilities, became a role model [3] for the so-called "Krüppelbewegung" (literally: crippled movement) in the mid-1970s that sought to counter the discrimination of persons with disabilities in German society. In parallel, the Report on the Psychiatric Survey [Bericht der Psychiatrie-Enquete] (1975) on the state of psychiatry in the

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Federal Republic of Germany challenged the organisations supporting specialised hospitals to satisfy the basic human needs of their patients. Among other consequences, this provided the incentive to develop outpatient services [4]. These developments contributed to a paradigm shift. Social actors and institutions tried to limit the number of residents in residential facilities in order to give the residents more privacy. Currently, they are committed to providing facilities in the city centre rather than in the outskirts in order to enhance the participation of persons with special needs in society. The aim - is to "enable persons with disabilities to attain and maintain maximum independence, full physical, mental, social and vocational ability, and full inclusion and participation in all aspects of life" (Article 26, 1) [2]. Furthermore, through "comprehensive habilitation and rehabilitation services", States Parties to the Convention are obliged to "[s]upport participation and inclusion in the community and all aspects of society". These services and programmes "are voluntary, and are available to persons with disabilities as close as possible to their own communities, including in rural areas" (Article 26, 1b) [2]. That is the reason why disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and other associations consider social space as relevant for the successful implementation of the UNCRPD in Germany. Against this background, the question arises as to how the social space orientation can contribute to the "full and effective participation and inclusion" (Art. 3) [2] of persons with disabilities.

In Germany, "the idea of social spaces (Sozialräume) became a significant conceptual reference since the early 1990s. Starting [in the area of youth care and work] a variety of approaches based on the concept of social spaces were developed in social work debates around theory and practice. Meanwhile, after some years of discussion the idea of a 'social space orientation' (Sozialraumorientierung) can be regarded as a paradigm in the current social work in Germany" [5]. Hence, a first step is to actually define the notion of "social space" before introducing the socio-spatial approach.

II. WHAT DOES SOCIAL SPACE MEAN?

There are different definitions of, as well as concepts and instruments related to social space. Indeed, the social space field professes a multi-perspective and transdisciplinary approach. It reaches from geography to social work through urban sociology. To summarise the current academic debate, researchers such as Deinet [6] and Kessl & Reutlinger [8] all pursue a similar objective, i.e. the enhancement of the social correlation perspective through spatial development and the improved efficiency of existing resources.

Initially, the difference between absolute, relative and relational space should be emphasised. As Lechner [9] puts it: "Space has never been central to sociological thoughts". Hence, when searching for the first approaches to understand and explain space, we have to turn to the fields of physics and mathematics for a definition of absolute space. Isaac Newton, for instance, "maintained that absolute space is a great void which objects occupy. It exists independently of objects, and if there were no objects, then space would still exist" [10]. In this

view, space resembles a fixed container that can continue to exist, indeed abides, no matter how bodies perform [11]. In contrast, social work assumes that any understanding of social space requires a focus on the acting in and not on the constitution of space. This leads to an understanding of space as a territory or district that pre-structures the actions of prominent groups and – in a trickle-down effect – of all groups. But this relative perception does not allow for the constitution of different spaces in one place through the actions of different groups. Indeed, the constitution of absolute space is still presented as if it were rigid, even immutable. It is only with the relational perspective that "Spatial structure is now seen not merely as a container in which social life unfolds, but rather as a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced" [12]. Moreover, this view defines space by means of the performing bodies that create the space: "(Social) space is a (social) product" [13]. However, in the current academic, political and practical discourses, opinions diverge. Therefore, it is necessary to find an appropriate range of theoretical approaches.

In this respect, the paper is based on a well-known and often-cited definition from the German sociologist Martina Löw [14]. Gidden's "theory of structuration" [7] and Bourdieu's "sociology of culture capital" [17] provide the foundation for Löw's dynamic and relational theory of social space:

"[S]pace [is] the outcome of action, which brings both social production practices and bodily deployment into focus. […] [S]pace is constituted through acts as the outcome of synthesis and positioning practices" [14].

As Löw further expounds:

"It is positioning in relation to other positionings. In the case of mobile goods or of people, spacing means both the moment of positioning and movement to the next positioning. Second, the constitution of space also requires synthesis, that is to say, goods and people are connected to form spaces through processes of perception, ideation, or recall" [14].

Spaces are thus the results of actions and structures. Actions are structured by space and, at the same time, space reproduces structures in everyday life. Löw calls it the "duality of space" [14]. The same applies to individuals. On the one hand, they are part of the positioning process and, on the other hand, they are also positioned as objects [14]. Hence, in sum, there are many different spaces in and perceptions of one place. But place is not part of the constitutional process of space. Place is characterised by the positioning of goods and people [14]. Löw thus goes to state that:

"If you park your car on the same spot in front of the house every day, a place comes into being for 'your car.' Even without the parked car, all the neighbours know that this spot is not to be otherwise occupied. The situating of the car in this spot produces a unique place, and at the same time the place makes the situating possible" [14].

Therefore, place is the aim and the result of positioning practices.

The dimension of space is constituted through positioning practices and perceptual connecting processes. Therefore, "the

'object' of interest must be expected to shift from things in space to the actual production of space" [13]. If the focus is placed on the actual production of space, it is possible to obtain more information about how to change social structures – including spatial structures. This helps to shift the perspective towards individuals and their agency and provides an opportunity to reflect upon and change structures. These insights are thus particularly fruitful with regard to the implementation progress of the UNCRPD - which leads us to the next question, namely 'how to analyse social space'.

III. How to Analyse Social Space?

Since social space represents both the individual and the social scope for action, it focuses on relationships, interactions and social conditions [15]. This is the reason why "'[s]pace is subjected to analysis in the social sciences as a 'product of social action' or as a 'product of social structures''' [14]. Hence, there is no single correct definition or theoretical approach and, in practice, all three dimensions – absolute, relative and relational– co-exist.

In order to render the definitions and approaches of social space accessible in practice, May [16] articulates theoretical and practical approaches into three aspects, i.e. social space as:

- "a space of planning and administration (…) (territorial)"
- "a space of constitution [that] refers to the living conditions and the reproduction facilities (…) (functional)"
- "community work (…) which focuses on the interests and needs of target groups (…)(categorical)" [16].

Hence, the main questions related to the analysis of social space can be worded as follows:

- Who designs the order of space?
- Who has the power to do so?
- How exactly are these phenomena related?
- And what do the context or the social conditions mean for the production of space?

Because social space emerges within everyday life, it is impossible to carry out a social space experiment in a laboratory. Indeed, important components of social space are the social structure, the material world of objects and bodies and the symbolic dimension of the social world. Space therefore emerges in the interplay between objects, structures and action. This is why it is necessary to enroll both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

In many research projects about the socio-spatial approach, quantitative methods are used to uncover the objective and material conditions of life. This information is required in order to establish a relationship between objective conditions and subjective impressions. However, to obtain information about the subjective impressions and the everyday lives of individuals, it is crucial to harness qualitative methods. Spatscheck [5] has developed various specific research methods, such as the "needle method", to collect and compile data on subjective impressions. This is a good method to visualise the places that are frequented by inhabitants. It can be used to demonstrate the meaning of special places [6], however it cannot be enrolled to obtain further subjective information because it remains rather superficial. The needle method should

be coupled with further research in the shape of "qualitative interviews with 'key persons'" at the meeting points, for example.

IV. Research Design

The aim of a new project is to analyse the application of the socio-spatial approach in the field of residential facilities for persons with disabilities and its relevance for the implementation process of the UNCRPD in Germany.

By combining different qualitative research methods, it intends to identify the level(s) of social space orientation in the field of services for persons with disabilities. The main questions guiding the investigation are:

- Which practices, offers, etc. are currently characteristic of the work performed in residential facilities for people with disabilities?
- Which interpretative paradigms are based on the socio-spatial approach?
- How do people with disabilities evaluate and experience socio-spatial practice?

The study should thus provide more insights about how social spaces are constructed for and by people with disabilities. Moreover, it will hopefully not only uncover practical and theoretical blind spots and highlight problematic aspects in the implementation of this approach but also provide an impetus to expand and deepen its scope. The evaluation process itself will be based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).

Around twenty qualitative guided interviews with members of the management, employees and residents with disabilities were conducted and document analyses (e.g. mission statements of the organizations) were carried out. The insights how are obtained until now enable the presentation of the intermediary results of the study. As the data collection has not been completed yet, no final conclusions can be drawn so far. But it is very reasonable to assume that a social space orientation in connection with the UNCRPD could contribute to a more inclusive belonging, especially for people with disabilities who live in residential facilities.

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