

# Conceptualisation of a Transdisciplinary Resource Theory for Social Work

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*Focusing on resources and thinking in a resource-orientated way has become a standard in social work, psychology, and psychotherapy. Various disciplinary strands are dedicated to fundamental questions of resources but are hardly connected to each other. Resource-orientation has been a fundamental element in the thinking and action approaches of social work from the very beginning. However, no resource theory conceptually incorporates and shapes the transdisciplinary approach of this discipline. Basic questions about what is meant by a resource, what makes a resource a resource or what significance re-sources have or should have in social policy or social work thinking and action are rarely asked. This article takes up relevant aspects from existing sociological, philosophical, psychological and social work concepts of resources, establishes conceptual links between them and develops a transdisciplinary concept of resources that can be fundamental, especially in the theory and action spectrum of social work, but not only there.*

*Keywords: resource theory, resource orientation, social work, social work theory, interdisciplinarity, IMTM Resource Theory*

## RESOURCES – THEIR THEMATIZATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE IN INDIVIDUAL DISCIPLINES

The term ‘resource’ is derived from the French word ‘la ressource’, which refers to the Latin ‘resurgere’ (to spring forth) (Schubert/Knecht, 2020). In general, resources are understood as means, conditions, characteristics or properties that pursue goals, meet requirements, perform specific actions or carry out a process in a targeted manner. In economics, this term is still used today to primarily describe material goods. In contrast, sociology has expanded the term to include social and socio-ecological characteristics and psychology to include personal or psychological characteristics. In social work, the term is also used to discuss the connection between material and immaterial assistance (Bünder, 2002).

### Sociology

Although the concept of resources plays a subordinate role in sociology, it is used in some contexts, particularly in the sociology of inequality. Even the various notions of capital presented in Bourdieu’s theory of types of capital represent resources in the sense of means. However, his concept emphasises the possibility of accumulation, while the concept of resources focuses more on useful and versatile use. Bourdieu uses the term of ‘resource’ to describe his types of capital. He describes social capital as

*“the totality of actual and potential resources associated with the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships in exchange for mutual knowledge or recognition; or, in other words, resources based on belonging to a group” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 63).*

Bourdieu (2010) emphasises the strategic use of resources to maintain the social status quo. While he attempts to establish a common level for all of them, the British sociologist Antony Giddens (1986) distinguishes between allocative and authoritative resources in his structuration theory. Allocative resources refer to the ability to control the access, appropriation and utilisation of natural resources and material objects. Authoritative resources refer to the ability to gain and maintain control over other actors. The spatio-temporal organisation of a society, the production and reproduction of people and the organisation of human life chances are linked to forms of authoritative resources. Giddens thus opens a distinction between distribution and hierarchisation.

Reinhard Kreckel (2004) combines Giddens’ distinction with Bourdieu’s theory of types of capital. On the one hand, he cites two “aggregate states” of inequality – unequal distribution of goods and asymmetrical relationships (Kreckel 2004, p. 19) – and on the other, he lists four resources that he describes as “strategic goods”: *material wealth*, *symbolic knowledge*, *position in hierarchical organisations* and *participation or membership in a “selective association”*. According to Kreckel, the first two resources are distributive, while the latter two (which represent two aspects of Bourdieu’s social capital) lead to relational inequality, i.e. they are not to be understood as ‘more’ or ‘less’, but as ‘above’ and ‘below’. Kreckel emphasises that a person’s position or rank in a hierarchical organisation (especially in the workplace) determines both, their scope for action and power – and their income as well. Participation in selective associations (e.g. families, circles of friends and acquaintances, and clubs) should also be considered relationally (for relational sociology, see e.g. Diaz-Bone, 2018).

Kreckel (2004, p. 75) discusses – in a similar way to Dahrendorf (1979) and Meulemann (2004) – resources as the starting point for the unequal distribution of life chances. Thus, for Meulemann (2004, p.131), resources are

*“instrumental and as an instrument unspecific, they are ... ‘generalised media’. They can ... be realised in many ways; and can be realised with a ... certain probability. ... Precisely because resources grant opportunities in life, their distribution is not accepted as a fact but rather evaluated as ... social inequality.”*

The various authors thus focus on the potentiality of resources, which makes it possible to connect to inequality-sociological considerations and philosophical concepts of justice, such as the capability approach, but also to psychological concepts of resources.

## **Philosophy**

Amartya Sen develops his capability approach as a counterpart to a materialistic concept of resources as used by Dworkin (2011), for example, but also to Rawls’ (1975) discussion of the fair distribution of basic goods. According to Sen, rather than focussing on resources, analyses of justice or inequality should focus on what can be achieved with them. A person’s capabilities (functionings) mediate between the use of resources and the conditions achieved (see also Otto/Scherr/ Ziegler, 2010). Capabilities are the room for manoeuvre that results from the available resources and abilities.

However, according to Sen, the ability to utilise resources depends not only on individual competencies, but also on factors outside the person (cf. Otto/Schrödter, 2011). Sen (1992, p. 81) therefore distinguishes between three types of *conversion factors*: *Personal conversion factors*, *social conversion factors* (including politics, social norms, discriminatory practices or gender roles) and *environmental conversion factors* (such as climate and particularities of the geographical location). However, Sen conceptualizes contextual factors in a second way. He establishes – in a macro approach – five conditions as “freedoms” that expand the scope for action: (1) political or democratic freedoms that allow the population to

incorporate their needs into political processes, (2) economic freedoms in the form of access rights to markets and economic opportunities, (3) institutions that guarantee social opportunities, such as educational institutions and the healthcare system, (4) (social) transparency that allows the formation of social capital and helps to prevent corruption, and (5) minimum social security for the destitute (Sen, 1999, p. 52f.).

In summary, it can be said that Sen's framework regarding the scope for action is like the above-mentioned thematization of the potentiality of resources: Resources represent the starting point for purposeful action, which opens different scopes of action depending on individual ability. For Sen, the size of the room for manoeuvre even represents the central benchmark for the discussion of questions of justice and the assessment of social policy. He sees the task of social policy as increasing the room for manoeuvre (Sen, 1999). He does not take psychological factors into account. However, it will be seen below that the differentiation of *conversion factors* into personal, social and environmental factors is similar to a common approach to resource classification in psychology.

## Psychology

There are several elaborate resource approaches in psychology. For counselling and psychotherapy, they are action-oriented and equally theoretically based. An empirically based understanding of resources goes back to research on coping with critical or highly stressful life events. This led to a fundamental understanding of the inter-individual differences in the reaction to life stresses and their effects on development in childhood and adolescence as well as in the rest of the lifespan. In addition to (acquired) vulnerability, the differences are essentially attributed to individual physiological, psychological and social factors. The coping process is recognised and researched in its interdependence between the nature (and resources) of the stressful situation, the individual characteristic structure and the interpersonal relationship structure. For the coping process, the significance of social resources on a social level and the significance of cognitive judgements, attitudes and personality traits on a psychological level are identified.

One basis for this can be found in the *stress research* of Richard S. Lazarus (e.g. Lazarus/Folkman, 1984, Lazarus, 1990) and its continuation by Antonovsky (1987) in the salutogenesis model with the relevant resources "sense of coherence" and "generalised resistance resources" on the one hand, and in Hobfoll's resource model (1989) on the other, form a basis. In addition, socio-ecological research provides a complex understanding of the importance of resources for coping with life's challenges (see Schubert, et al., 2019).

Another developmental strand in the psychological understanding of resources is derived from *resilience research* (e.g. Rönna-Böse & Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2015). This longitudinal research describes protective factors or resources that help those affected to develop "normally", i.e. to maintain developmental and age-appropriate functioning, behavioural competence and health, despite the long-term effects of life stresses and strokes of fate. Specific positive individual characteristics and abilities, interpersonal relationships and favourable social, cultural and socio-ecological conditions that those affected find in their living environment or can develop themselves have been identified as protective factors.

Several empirically based resource theories are currently established in psychology, which are also received in other disciplines (e.g. sociology, social policy) and in transdisciplinary action sciences such as health science, social work and social pedagogy.

(1) In the *resource exchange theory*, the authors Uriel Foa and Edna B. Foa (1976; see also Törnblom & Kazemi, 2012) define the exchange of resources as a central feature of human relationships and social interactions: human behaviour is motivated by the procurement and exchange of resources, and human interactions can be described and explained by the resources used. The individual as well as social significance and value of resources is decisively shaped socio-culturally through socialisation and enculturation. Foa and Foa (1976) categorise resources into six classes, which they position in relation to each other in a circular structural model: Love (affection, warmth, comfort, assistance), services (work/activities for others), goods (products, objects, materials), money (and all symbolic gifts with exchange value), information (instruction, teaching, opinion, advice, enlightenment) and status (prestige, respect, reputation) (see also Schubert & Knecht 2020; Starke 2000). Resources such as attention, products,

money or respect can support each other but cannot be transferred into each other at will. This points to the need for a multidimensional view of resources. Their definition (“anything that can be transmitted from one person to another”; Foa & Foa, 1976: 101) indicates that they understand resources to be something that belongs to a person but is at the same time external to them.

(2) In his *Conservation of Resources Theory (COR Theory)*, Steven E. Hobfoll (1989) analyses the impact of stressful life situations on the resources of individuals and social communities. Under stressful conditions, the existence and subjective assessment of resources become very important for coping with life’s challenges. In this respect, this theory provides a particular boost for social work. Hobfoll (1988, p. 73) defines resources as “those objects, personal qualities, conditions or energies that the individual values, or ... are the means of achieving those objects, personal qualities, conditions or energies”.

Hobfoll develops three main paths: (i) the significance and impact of resource losses on coping with life demands; (ii) the significance and use of resources in the social environment for coping with and preventing imminent resource losses and excessive demands, as well as for creating quality of life, health stabilisation and a successful lifestyle; (iii) the significance of resource exchange. His theory is based on the fundamental assumption that people endeavour to cope with life’s challenges while protecting themselves, their goals and their social relationships (family, social community). Accordingly, they try to shield resources from impairment and loss and to build up and expand resources. To do this, they must constantly utilise personal, social and economic resources. If life events or problems lead to the feeling that one’s own resources are threatened, depleted or lost, this leads to serious stress and further resource-consuming life risks. Therefore, it is not the event itself or its individual assessment – as postulated by Lazarus/Folkman (1984) – that is decisive for the development of stress, but the individual experience of resource threat and loss.

According to Buchwald and Hobfoll (2013), the key findings of empirical research on COR theory can be summarised in three principles: (i) Resource losses are perceived as more significant and serious than resource gains of a comparable magnitude. (ii) People must use resources to protect themselves from resource losses, recover from them, or build up new resources. This means that resources are used up relatively quickly to cope with highly stressful life events and can only be compensated for with the use of additional resources (e.g. social-emotional support, welfare state support measures, finances). (iii) Individuals or communities who already have significant resource losses or a lack of resources are vulnerable to further resource losses and are therefore susceptible to multiple impairments in their lifestyle and health. Maintaining and building up resources is therefore of central importance in the organisation of life.

(3) As part of his *salutogenesis model*, Aaron Antonovsky (1987) developed a popular resource concept with two pillars for maintaining health and coping with stressful life demands (stressors): the “sense of coherence” and the “generalised resistance resources”. Antonovsky understands the sense of *coherence* as a comprehensive individual resource, as a construct of confident cognitive-emotional and social-emotional basic attitudes towards the world and one’s own life, and that this life is understandable and comprehensible, as well as controllable and manageable and fundamentally meaningful and significant. (“Understandability of life”, “manageability of life” and “meaningfulness of life”). This results in “superordinate” resources such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and trust in a social as well as a superordinate sense of belonging and security.

Antonovsky defines *generalised resilience resources* as a spectrum of generally effective personal, interpersonal, cultural and material resources. Their use in everyday life stabilizes the maintenance or improvement of health, life satisfaction and quality of life for all individuals. It has been criticised that the three dimensions of the sense of coherence postulated by Antonovsky cannot be meaningfully separated in a factor analysis (e.g. Becker, 2006). However, concerning the construct as a whole, well over 500 international studies now confirm the statements on the positive health effects of the sense of coherence (Bengel & Lyssenko, 2012).

(4) Heiner Keupp (2012) *expands the concept of salutogenesis* in a socio-psychological approach to health promotion, which he combines with Sen’s capability approach (see above). While the classic perspective on illness leads to health promotion being conceptualised as risk avoidance and risk

management, the implementation of salutogenesis calls for a broader perspective, including that of civil society, which focuses on both personal and environmental resources. Health is seen as an integral part of an independent lifestyle. Support for self-determined lifestyles, competences, and well-being and the factors and resources contained therein are therefore considered to be health-promoting (overview by Schubert, 2012), as is the cultivation of beneficial material, social, and ecological resources and the reduction of socially unequally distributed risks and stressors. From this perspective, generalised resilience resources represent capabilities that increase the scope for action. It is then not only “the task of institutions to promote access to these resources for subjects, but also to create structures that strengthen people in the sense of empowerment in the exercise of their rights and help them to become more capable of acting” (Keupp, 2012, p. 51). Capabilities are enhanced by generalised resistance resources as well as psychological/mental resources (e.g. self-efficacy expectations, Bandura 1997).

**(5) Klaus Grawe’s personality-psychological resource approach** is based on the consistency theory of psychological functioning (Grawe 2004) and is increasingly used in psychotherapy, not least due to the empirically proven effectiveness of resource work. According to Grawe (ibid.), psychological stability, functioning, well-being and health in the context of an individual’s lifestyle are essentially established and maintained through the appropriate fulfilment of biologically anchored basic mental needs (need for pleasure/avoidance of pleasure, attachment, orientation/control and for self-esteem enhancement/self-esteem protection). Accordingly, needs are essentially satisfied through the use of resources, namely interpersonal resources (e.g. emotionally significant attachment figures) and, with increasing psycho-emotional maturation, also through the use of individual psychological/mental resources. According to this approach, resources are the potentials at a person’s disposal in their living environment to satisfy their basic needs and thus maintain their psychological stability (overview in Klemenz, 2012).

**(6) Peter Becker (2006)** develops a **systemic requirements-resources model (SAR model)**, which integrates the theoretical approaches of Hobfoll, Antonovsky and Grawe (see above) under the meta-framework of the systems theory approach of Uexküll and Wesiak (1986). With reference to the bio-psycho-social interactions between the individual and the social environment, Becker postulates reciprocal demands between the two for the fulfilment or satisfaction of which they – ideally – provide or exchange resources. This means that people depend on resources provided by other people, particularly for the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, but in many cases for the fulfilment of external requirements. The interactions with social and cultural institutions, on the other hand, are hardly addressed in this model. Becker’s concept of resources is to be understood primarily from this perspective of the fulfilment of demands and needs: Resources are “means or individual characteristics that living systems or system elements can draw on when needed in order to cope with external or internal demands with their help” (Becker, 2006, p. 133).

**(7) The transactional resource concept of Franz-Christian Schubert** (2016; Schubert, et al., 2019) refers to the SAR model of Becker (2006) and expands it from a socio-ecological perspective; the concepts of Bourdieu and Hobfoll (see above) are included for further theoretical framing. Based on a systemic-transactional model of lifestyle, Schubert develops an understanding of resources that considers the complex conditions of lifestyle and the reciprocity of the individual and the environment about tasks and expectations as well as the possibilities for shaping and utilising resources. In addition to person-related resources, the approach includes cross-personal, external resources. It focuses on the importance of person-environment interactions in the organisation of resource accessibility and exchange across the lifespan, the various life situations and circumstances.

## Social Work

In his work on the concept of resources in social work, Dieter Röh (2012) looks at three theories: Thiersch’s lifeworld orientation (e.g. Thiersch, et al., 2002), emergent systems theory (e.g. Staub-Bernasconi, 2007) and socio-ecological theory (e.g. Gitterman/Germain, 2008, Wendt, 2010). He points out that the theorisation of social work in its history has been already strongly oriented towards the needs of clients, which represents a form of resource orientation, and that such a perspective would also find a counterpoint in social work, which is more concerned with adapting its clients to social requirements (Röh,

2012, p. 191). However, the concept of resources in social work proves to be under-theorised and inconsistent.

In the concept of *lifeworld orientation*, central resources for life management are recognised in the certainties of action, relationships and routines of everyday lifeworld, and in the antagonistic pressures (cf. Thiersch, et al., 2012) but are linked to the criticism of technocratic “resource management” without having a clear concept of resources being formulated in more detail (cf. Röh, 2012).

The *systems theory* of the Zurich School (“emergent systems theory”) also uses the concept of resources. Staub-Bernasconi conceptualises social work in terms of social problems and sees “resource development” as her “oldest way of working” (Staub-Bernasconi 2018, p. 316), which responds to problems of “physical endowment (illness, epidemics, disabilities, anorexia such as obesity ...), socio-economic endowment (educational hardship/labour poverty, the problems of the “working poor” ...)” and “socio-ecological endowment (deteriorating workplace conditions, lack of or unreasonable as well as inadequate socio-spatial infrastructure in the areas of health, work, physical and psychological safety ...)” (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018: 273). She criticises the broad use of the concept of resources (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018, p. 317), but without restricting its use itself. The term thus remains ambiguous between an economic definition and a broader understanding. In further developing Geiser’s (2009) approach, the concept of resources is based more pronouncedly on Antonovsky (cf. Röh, 2012, p. 195).

The *socio-ecological theory* of Alex Gitterman and Carel B. Germain and (1999), formulated as a “life model”, is based on the stress research of Lazarus (see above) and the socio-ecological research of Uri Bronfenbrenner (1981) and the Chicago School. Lifestyle is understood as a socio-ecological interaction between the demands and resources of the individual and the environment, whereby demands and resources are in a complementary relationship. Lifestyle, developmental transitions and the fulfilment of needs are thus to be understood as an ongoing coping process for which people need individual and environmental resources. Here, too, there is a broad connection to psychological resource theories, not least because of the reference to psychological-socio-ecological research. However, in this approach “the political impetus of a resource orientation ... tends to be lost” (Röh, 2012, p. 197). In his eco-social theory, Wendt (2010) takes the socio-ecological concept of resources further. Here, resources are “assets” that must be utilised and nurtured by both the individual and the community for human well-being (for an overview: Schubert, 2013). In social work, this takes place “both as resource work with an individual impact and through resource management with a supra-individual impact” (Röh, 2012: 198). There are broad overlaps between the life model’s theoretical-conceptual basis and Schubert’s above-mentioned transactional resource concept (2016).

## TRANSDISCIPLINARY UNDERSTANDINGS

What the sociological aspects have in common is the thematization of the potentiality of resources and their different distribution: The availability of these resources creates socially unequally distributed opportunities that social groups strategically use to pursue their own interests and goals. This gives rise to typical social distribution patterns, the cause of which lies, among other things, in the transformability of resources.

As shown, Bourdieu emphasises the socially unequal distribution and strategic use of resources: in his view, economic, cultural and social resources are primarily used to achieve distinction and maintain status. In contrast, Dahrendorf and Meulemann emphasise the importance of general life opportunities and scope for action. Giddens and Kreckel (see above) are even more resolute than Bourdieu in focussing on the connection between resources and the exercise of power. This focus also explains why Kreckel emphasises hierarchical aspects of social capital over distributional aspects.

It is not so much the sociological approaches that address the social conditions of the use of resources. Rather, social work approaches, and particularly Amartya Sen’s capability approach, lead this discussion in the context of *conversion factors*. He pursues the question of the social conditions under which material resources can be utilised in the best possible way. Quality of life, which a high life expectancy can measure, for example, is only partially dependent on individual prosperity, but is rather influenced by social context

factors of welfare production. Thus, Sen includes health as a resource in his analysis, expanding the sociological discussion on resources.

Psychological resource categories hardly play a role in the sociological study of resources. Bourdieu thematises psychological categories as incorporated cultural capital or as habitus (Zander, 2010, El-Mafaalani & Wirtz, 2011, Gröning, 2016). This transfer of psychological categories into sociological categories has created a disciplinary boundary. Some psychological categories follow a pattern similar to other resources: They support the individual in many different life situations and are unequally distributed in society (Knecht, 2012).

With the exception of Foa/Foa's theory, which focuses on the interpersonal exchange of resources, all psychological and psychosocial theories address psychological stress or demands and ways to cope with them. In some concepts, the value of resources only emerges in relation to their coping function. The salutogenesis concept focuses on the ability to cope with stress and the creation or maintenance of mental and physical health in stressful situations. Antonovsky (1987) regards the sense of coherence as a "hinge resource" for this purpose. In some psychosocial and psychotherapeutic fields, the view prevails that every person has or can develop resources themselves or in co-operation with their social environment that can contribute to improving their lives. The lack of utilisation of resources is a problem, which is why (resource) activation is a suitable means of intervention. In addition to the tendency to individualise existing, socially determined problems, such a view also ignores the significance of social inequality.

In his resource conservation theory, Hobfoll emphasizes the long-term "management" of resources. He also addresses material resources but focuses more on non-material resources. In doing so, he also points out the individual differences in the perception and cognitive processing of stress as well as individual experiences of effectiveness. At the same time, he emphasises the possibility of preventing stress at a social level: the importance of individual resources is determined by the social and cultural context – like Amartya Sen's theory (Buchwald, et al., 2004).

By linking the salutogenesis concept with the capability approach, Keupp also includes the social level in the context of health promotion and stress prevention. This makes it possible to connect to the discussion on health and social inequality, as conducted by British social epidemiologists and summarised by Pickett and Wilkinson (2010) with the slogan "Equality is happiness".

Socio-ecological approaches from the resource perspective focus on the complex interactions (or interdependencies, transactions) between the individual and the environment in the organization of lifestyle. This refers to person-environment interdependencies resulting from the interaction of pressures due to demands or exclusion on the part of the social or material environment as well as to individual expectations and needs on the one hand and the mutual accessibility and availability, both in the environment and in the individual, of the resources required to cope with stress or fulfil goals or needs on the other. A person-environment interdependence is expressed (a) in the sense of mutual support or exclusion in the access to resources, as well as (b) an appropriate fit between environmental or individual requirements and the available coping resources about them. For an appropriate understanding of resources that can be applied transdisciplinary to the various (political and socio-economic) life situations and life phases of people, the theoretical concepts presented here that focus on the person-environment interaction are particularly useful.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESOURCE THEORY**

Knecht and Schubert develop a transdisciplinary resource approach concerning the theories and references discussed (Knecht, 2010, 2011, 2012, Knecht & Schubert, 2020, Schubert, 2016), with the following focal points: (1) They consider a broad spectrum of resources. (2) The value and usefulness of resources only emerge against the background of tasks and objectives. (3) Resources can be inherent in the person as well as in the environment. Particular attention must be paid to (4) the transformability, (5) the accumulation and loss spirals of resources as well as (6) the interdependence of personal and external resources and (7) key resources. Resources can be used to describe (8) room for manoeuvre and opportunities in life, and (9) a differentiated approach to life contexts and phases of life as well as (10) an intervention-oriented approach to life situations.

## **Broad Spectrum of Resources**

The developed resource approach considers a broad spectrum of resources and can be considered a multidimensional approach: In addition to Bourdieu's triad (economic, social, material resources), mental and physical resources (e.g. health) are significant. In principle, the approach is open to other types of resources: depending on the conceptualisation, physical size or attractiveness as well as time and space could also be considered as resources (cf. Knecht, 2010; Schubert/Knecht, 2020).

## **Consideration Regarding the Objectives**

Resources can only be determined and evaluated concerning specific goals, whether these are personal goals of life organisation such as coping, satisfaction or happiness or – as in the case of evaluative questions – so-called objective goals (output/outcome indicators) such as work activity, income or social ideas of quality of life.

## **Resources Can Be Differentiated in Their Relation to the Person**

Mental and physical resources are to be understood as inherent characteristics of the person, material resources are external to the person but can be attributed to them; social contacts can be attributed to a person but are always interpersonal. The *social* and *environmental conversion factors* as defined by Sen represent external resources.

## **Transformability**

Resources are interdependent. The endowment with one resource can promote access to other resources as well as the acquisition or development of other resources, i.e. one resource can be transformed (converted) into another. Education, for example, has a major influence on income. In addition to education and psychological/mental resources (such as self-confidence, commitment), social resources can be used to find (well-paid) work and thus increase material resources in the form of income. In turn, higher health and life expectancy correlate with higher income. Resources can be seen as the result of past circumstances and as a starting point for future action or transformation opportunities (Knecht, 2010: 35; 2011; Schubert/Knecht, 2020). This results in self-reinforcing relationships (higher income leads to better health, which in turn leads to higher income). Psychological/mental and interactional resources are also transformed and expanded through interaction processes with reference persons on both sides (Schubert 2012, 2016).

## **Accumulation and Loss Spirals**

The transformability of resources leads to a relatively rapid accumulation of further resources or types of resources when resources are well endowed and, conversely, a poor endowment of resources often leads to further losses of resources (loss spiral). Analysing resources, their transformations and mutual reinforcement make it possible to understand (potential) upward processes as well as the consolidation and reproduction of poverty and loss spirals. By analysing the accumulation of resources that is possible for some people and the spirals of loss that other people suffer, the scissor effects discussed by Schubert (2004: 204), i.e. the drifting apart into resource-rich and -poor groups, become clear. Resource theory can therefore be used to analyse the emergence and persistence of social inequality and its intergenerational transmission.

## **Interdependence Between Personal and Environmental Resources**

The reciprocal interaction of external resources and personal resources is important for the organisation of lifestyle, i.e. their mutual fit and accessibility and the reciprocal support or even obstruction processes in the accessibility of resources. The more both "sides", i.e. the person and the environment, coordinate, provide, organise and use their resources, the more successful their lifestyle will be (Schubert 2016).

## **Key Resources**

To be able to utilise existing external or specific personal resources (e.g. talents, skills) in the long term, the individual needs specific key resources that enable them to recognise and access resources within themselves, in their social environment and in the social world, handle them appropriately and transform



them into sustainable resources to lead their lives (Schubert 2012, 2016). This refers to a person's favourable characteristics and attitudes towards life, such as education, cognitive abilities, a confident attitude towards life, commitment, but also social integration and support. Antonovsky (1987) ascribes such a "hinge functions" to the sense of coherence.

### **Description of Room for Manoeuvre and Life Opportunities**

Since resources have an inherent potentiality, they can be used to depict room for manoeuvre and life opportunities. This possibility appears attractive because there have been various theoretical approaches to depicting room for manoeuvre (e.g. by Weisser, Nahnsen and Sen: see Knecht, 2010) and life chances (Dahrendorf, 1979), but their empirical implementation has so far not been realized.

### **Life Phase Perspective**

As life contexts and life phases each entail different demands, restrictions and burdens, people need different resources. From the sociology of inequality perspective, the early phases of life are characterised by the (socially unequal) development of mental resources (cf. attachment theory) and the resource of education. Education is converted into income through work in the middle phase of life. Socially unequal health and a statistically different life expectancy characterise the third phase of life as *over-all indicators*. At the same time, there are (e.g. psychological or social) meta-resources that are beneficial in several or all stages of life. From a social work perspective, the question arises as to which resources are needed and can be promoted in which phases and situations of life.

### **Intervention-Orientation**

The multidimensional description of resources and the description of room for manoeuvre and life chances are not only of interest for a sociological perspective, for example to describe the social structure, but also prove to be connectable and significant for social and social work purposes and modes of action in specific life situations, such as social diagnostics or the description of measures, e.g. the promotion of social capital through networking (cf. Knecht & Schubert, 2012).

## **A TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESOURCE THEORY FOR SOCIAL WORK**

The developed transdisciplinary resource approach provides a scientifically sound basis for thematizing resources in social work. At the same time, it brings together the two fundamental strands of the understanding of resources, the individual-functional and the sociological-sociopolitical understanding (Röh, 2012).

In social work, resource orientation is usually understood as a general guideline for action and attitude (see e.g. Möbius/Friedrich, 2010), in which different approaches and procedures are included (for an overview see Schubert, 2021). Some social work methods, such as networking (Strauss, 2012) or informal educational work, are based on a single resource type. Other methods, such as resource diagnosis (Deubner-Böhme, Deppe-Schmitz & Tröskén, 2013; Glemser & Gahleitner, 2012; Schiepek & Cremers, 2003), resource-oriented counselling (Werner & Nestmann, 2012) or resource activation (Flückiger & Wüsten, 2008; Knecht & Schubert, 2012; Schubert, 2021) focus on a complex resource perspective by referring to several types of resources. This explains why specialised professional groups such as doctors, psychotherapists, teachers or tax advisors provide help for problems or the collapse of single, mostly individual resources, while the responsibility for multi-dimensional problems, i.e. when resources from several dimensions are affected, is often seen as belonging to social work.

Resource orientation forms a universal basis for understanding human behaviour and quality of life. It represents a counter-position to concepts of disorders, deficits and marginalisation. However, personal problems and inadequately successful lifestyles should not – as is often the case with individualising attributions – be understood solely as the effect of personal deficits or as deviant behaviour on the person's part. Rather, problem situations must be understood in terms of a reciprocal understanding of requirements and resources and in interaction with key resources.

The availability of enough resources in the living environment, especially material resources, is undoubtedly very important for the organisation of lifestyle and quality of life, but it is insufficient. Due to the interdependence of resources and the person-environment interaction, it is important for social work to consider the entire spectrum of external and personal resources, their accessibility and their interaction. For example, social work counselling for the unemployed cannot do without looking at individual key resources as well as mental problems. Material and non-material problems must be considered in their interdependence.

At the same time, it must be understood in counselling processes, for example, that resources often only emerge through interaction. A stable relationship of trust and recognition – for example in counselling the unemployed – can provide a necessary basis for clients to build up self-efficacy and motivation. In an assessment or profiling at the beginning of a counselling process, a resource situation can only be determined provisionally. Instead, the development and interaction of personal, external and economic resources must be sustainably set in motion through the processes of resource work. The aim of any work with people must be to counteract the threat of a loss of resources or the further loss of resources that has already occurred and to promote and activate individual, community and external resources to shape their lives.

In addition, social work is required to focus on the difference between allocative and authoritative resources, inequality structures and hierarchisation: For example, problematic relationships of recognition that go hand in hand with material poverty and can have an impact on mental resources (Armutskonferenz, et al., 2018) and health (Knecht & Obermair, 2020) must be considered. The consideration of resources can also be particularly useful when analysing inequality structures and their (social work) treatment. Unequal distributions of resources, such as income and wealth, health inequality and its consequences (cf. e.g. Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010), and inequality of educational opportunities, represent the social background to social problems.

At the same time, analyses of these inequalities reveal the comprehensive role of the (welfare) state in creating and maintaining social inequality. For example, it has been shown that multi-tier, highly segmented school systems reinforce social inequalities and produce them (e.g., Becker & Lauterbach, 2016). Country comparisons show that countries that make greater efforts to achieve social equality in terms of social policy tend to support weaker pupils, whereas countries that emphasise inequalities in school performance – e.g. through the type of grading, through selection in the transition to secondary schools and through the separation of “elites” – thereby perpetuate inequality (cf. e.g. Solga, 2014, Allmendinger & Leibfried, 2003).

Regarding resource theory, social policy interventions can therefore be understood as allocating resources and mapping their (socially unequal) effects on the resource endowment of individuals (Knecht & Schubert, 2012, Knecht, 2010, 2012). They answer the question of what is allocated to whom through which interventions. With such an extended resource perspective, the significance of social policy, as well as the function of social work within this structure, can be illustrated (cf. Vogel, 2004: 51). Its image as a redistributive, social “repair mechanism” is thus relativized and its comprehensive, society-shaping and society-structuring power is clarified (Scheidegger, 2015). The distribution of the various resources and the power to dispose of them determines whether life is successful or social problems and marginalisation arise. Social work is often called upon when the socio-political distribution or allocation of resources is not provided solely through cash benefits, but face-to-face.

However, the professional understanding of social work is characterised precisely by the fact that it does not see the field of work as being limited solely to working on individual resources, but also envisages influencing the allocation or collective distribution of various resources. Concepts such as political empowerment (Herriger, 2014), the triple mandate (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018), discussions on further mandates of social work (e.g. Röhl, 2013) and the increased reception of concepts such as policy practice (Burzlaff & Eifler, 2018, Rieger, 2016), particularly in Germany, continue the political claim that has accompanied social work since its beginnings, namely not to accept the social conditions that are partly responsible for the problems of its clients. Policy practice techniques (e.g. Figueira-McDonough, 1993), such as influencing legislation through lobbying for disadvantaged parties, obtaining landmark rulings in

courts in their favour or organising political protests, show that the distribution and allocation of resources in social work must also be considered on a broader scale. However, this work requires social workers who are aware of the importance of the framework conditions of their clients' lives and their own professional actions (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018), and corresponding organisations that implement such approaches. The question of the enforceability of "weak interests" points to the importance of power processes and thus forms a bridge between social work resource concepts and so-called power resource theories (Ostheim & Schmidt, 2007).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is a revised and enlarged version of an article in German (Knecht / Schubert 2020).

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