

Ilse Arlt - The Austrian Pioneer of Poverty and Welfare research based Social Work Theory and Practice

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1 Introduction

Arlt's life work includes the collection of empirical „*Foundations for Welfare*“ and the preparation for „*Paths to a Science of Welfare*“ – these are the titles of her two main publications in 1921 and 1958. Her academic work took place under the sign of a science of „poverty and welfare research“. Arlt did not perceive this as a means in itself, but as an integral part of her concept of professional welfare and care. In her „*Obituary of the first Austrian school for Welfare*“ Arlt writes in 1950 that her approach was well known „abroad, especially in England ... [as] the Austrian Method of Welfare Research and Education“ (cp. Arlt 1950: 10). An unknown English author reported in 1948: „*In October 1933 Ilse Arlt delivered the third Loch Memorial lecture 'On the way to the Scientific Analysis of Poverty'. From 1927 she had been in constant touch with C.O.S. work, through the Rev. J. C. Pringle. In 1936 she attended the International Congress on Social Work in London. In September 1937 came the jubilee commemoration of 25 years of work of her School of Social Work in Vienna, and the entry of the coming session included two English, one Swedish and several Czecho-Slovak students: Ilse Arlt's dream of an International School seemed to come true. In March 1938 came the Anschluss (annexation, M.M.), the shattering of the dream, the suppression of the School, and silence. This silence was broken in 1946, and early in 1947 came news that Ilse Arlt was trying in spite of almost overwhelming difficulties to re-open the School ...*“ (cp. unknown author 1948).

Although Arlt influenced the professional discourse of her times in Europe and enriched it with an independent concept of welfare theory and method, her approach was quickly forgotten after her school was closed in 1950. For many decades her body of work was not dealt with. Even those parts of her research and teaching material that were not touched by the NS regime were merely saved and stored until recently.

For 15 years there has been a gradual renaissance of Ilse Arlt, the Austrian pioneer of scientifically based social work. In 2007, the „*Ilse Arlt Institute for Social Inclusion Research*“ was founded at the University for Applied Studies in St. Pölten, Austria. I am working in a project settled there on the scientific re-edition and dissemination of Ilse Arlt's work, the first edition of her autobiographies and the scientific processing and digitalization of the extensive legacy of the Arlt School, the „*Collections of Ilse Arlt*“. Three volumes of the new edition were finished recently. The shortly accessible English and Slovenian translation of „*Ways to a Social Welfare and Care Science*“ is a reaction to the recently emerging interest in Arlt's work and serves as a basis for further scientific response in the international professional discourse.

2 Arlt's Life and Work: A close link between biography and research interests

Ilse Arlt was born the second of four children on May 1, 1876 in Vienna, the sister of three brothers. Her grandfather was the world-famous professor for ophthalmology, Dr. Ferdinand Karl, Chevalier of Arlt. Ilse Arlt's father, Ferdinand, Chevalier of Arlt was also an ophthalmologist. Her mother, Marie Hönig, Edle von Hönigsberg was artistically talented, educated as a painter and fluent in several languages. Ilse Arlt's mother's background was Jewish (Ilse Arlt was Catholic). This would become a burden for Ilse Arlt during the Nazi-Regime.

Ilse received private education from her mother. She loved to learn the subjects of primary school in an autodidactic way and passed her exams every year with distinction. At the age of 16 she moved to Graz with her family. She prepared herself for the state examination in Latin and English, and passed the final exams for teaching English.

Her teaching certificate allowed her to attend lectures in pedagogy and geography at the university, when women were finally given access. Her plan to do the university entrance examinations in order to study national economy was stopped by another option: When she heard about the newly founded „Social Sciences Association“, she tried to be accepted as a member of the branch in Graz.

Her article written in 1901 about the „German Association for Social Policy“ attracted the attention of Professor Ernst Mischler, statistician and social scientist in Graz. He accepted her as a guest student in his seminars and offered her the position of a scientific assistant at the Statistical State Office of Styria. Both he and Prof. Dr. von Phillipovich, national economist in Vienna asked her to write an article for the “International Association for Legalized Workers' Protection” about night shifts of women in Austrian industry. Although she was unable to attend the congress, the article was presented in her name and applauded. In her autobiography she comments that this article „played a decisive role in allowing women the long-desired access to the Faculty of Law at Austrian universities“ (cp. Arlt o.J.: 10).

At the age of 25 Ilse Arlt was promoted to the position of an inspector for industry. Unfortunately she could not accept it for health reasons. Until 1905 she continued her studies with Prof. Dr. Philippovich in national economics and politics. In addition she gained practical experience by attending workers' meetings, visiting firms, apartments, and slums as well as participating in welfare investigations. Moreover, she wrote articles for magazines and newspapers. Arlt immersed herself during this time in different publications and reports about human suffering. In her publications of this period she dealt with the working conditions of women, work-family balance issues of single and married mothers, with the right for vacations and relaxation, with issue of sick pay, invalidity allowance and unemployment benefits and with issues of child protection. In these publications she argues for pertinent reforms and changes in the laws. Repeatedly she took the position that the problems of poverty and neediness cannot be solved without appropriate research data and adequate education. For this reason her idea of an education for welfare workers should teach knowledge, train practical experience and skills as well as build on research.

In 1910 Arlt gave a presentation at the International Congress for „Public Work Care and Private Welfare“ in Copenhagen, in which she mentioned her ideas of a profession as a welfare worker for the first time. Two years later, in 1912, she founded the first School for Welfare of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy in Vienna, the „Vereinigte Fachkurse für Volkspflege“ (The Unified Professional Courses for People's Care). „The term 'People's

Care' instead of 'social work' did not merely symbolize a new word, but a new idea indicating our desire to educate for helping activities in the future, not of the past.“ (Arlt 1950: 8f.) Part of this school was the „*Research and Experimental Institution of People’s Care*“.

With this school she realized her own concept of an education for social and welfare workers based on poverty and welfare research. In this research place Arlt and her Students established an extensive collection of teaching and research material, the „*Ilse Arlt Collection*“. It has a large number of fact based reports, observation notes, presentations and reflections about various aspects of poverty and wellbeing, mostly as a collection of pictures, quotes, newspaper and magazine clips that are available in different stages of editing and processing. The results were used on the one hand for the empirical database for suggestions on social and political reforms that are a part of the vast collection of Arlt’s publications, and on the other hand as didactically prepared teaching and presentation material for both in-school and societal educational projects. In 1912 Arlt wrote the book “Grundlagen der Fürsorge” (The basics of welfare service), and the First Republic honoured her for her efforts by giving her the title of “Bundesfürsorgerat” (federal care/welfare advisor).

In 1938 she was forbidden to teach due to her mother’s Jewish background. Furthermore, she was not allowed to publish, her educational institution was closed, her books were destroyed and her collection of material for a welfare museum (documentation center) was dispersed. Some remains were lost in the aftermath of the war. She became financially distressed, but she did not have to leave Austria.

Starting in 1946 she revived her professional courses, but a lack of resources and her failing health forced her to close down the school four years later. In 1954 she was honoured with the “Dr.-Karl-Renner” research prize. In 1958 her last book “*Wege zu einer Fürsorgewissenschaft*” (Paths to a Science of Welfare) was published at her 80th birthday.

3 The Influence of the School of „Descriptive National Economy“ on Arlt’s Thinking

A major influence for Arlt’s direction of thinking concerning a welfare system based on the science of poverty, were studies from the school of descriptive national economy in Vienna and Munich. These studies dealt with descriptions of living and working conditions from different branches and fields gained through undercover observations (cp. Arlt 1928: 165).

Arlt deeply regretted that this research direction was discontinued and the results were not systematically analyzed. She realized that the neglect of poverty, agricultural, and household problems and the scarce empirical material reflecting national economic academic opinions were a shortcoming. Descriptive national economy seemed like a door opener to „*Perspectives for a foundation of national economic teachings [through] realistic research (...)*“ (Arlt 1953: 126). In this context she hoped for contributions to the improvement of living and working conditions caused by poverty. Her hope was disappointed, nevertheless this confident autodidactic woman decided to continue to pursue this research direction in her own way – at first all alone and then later with her students.

The guideline for her future research was for Arlt not the strategy of calculating sums of poverty, but to measure the appropriate distance from the right needs satisfaction, in other words a positive strategy instead of the negative concept of poverty. The focus of wellbeing or needs satisfaction in the context of poverty research, apart from the seriousness of actual poverty, can be explained by the fact that Arlt saw the goal of poverty-/wellbeing-based welfare and care to enable and empower for a life of wellbeing. This approach is comparable

with the one Amartya Sen und Martha Nussbaum presented for the assessment of the conditions for a good quality of life by means of a yardstick capturing the degree of fulfilment of a number of basic human capabilities (cp. Nussbaum 1986, Nussbaum/Sen 1993, Maiss 2009, Hunold 2010).

1930 Arlt (cp. 1930: 747) pointed out that independent of each other these schools – the American and the English one that are based on 'casework' (individualized welfare) and the Unified Professional Courses for People's Care/Welfare in Vienna – have used the results of descriptive national economy that in the 1880s and 1890s of the last century and then disappeared. The English and American method is aimed at collecting experiences from a multitude of cases, which are used for the design of welfare and national instruction; the method used in Austria provides the students with the following basic structure described in the next paragraph.

4 Arlt's concept of a needs and need satisfaction in poverty assessment

„Here is the essential point: only a specific kind of human research – the research of needs – can explain the foundations for poverty research. The starting point is the human being. Every single case is the centre of investigation. The external factors that are essential for the human being are related to it and their influence analyzed. Only such forms of investigation allow us to contemplate poverty as such and make it the subject of further research.“ (Arlt 1932b: 1638)

Based on these theoretical considerations and preliminary assessment results of her empirical collections starting from 1902 (cp. Arlt 1932a: 67)² Arlt drew up a preliminary list of 13 basic needs that form aspects of human flourishing/wellbeing: 1. food; 2. lodging; 3. cleanliness, 4. clothing; 5. recreation (including rest, amusement and exercise); 6. air; 7. education; 8. mental development; 9. legal aid; 10. family-life; 11. medical help and nursing during sickness; 12. prevention of accidents and first aid; 13. economic training; religion is summarized under mind and spirit, freedom under legal protection (cp. Arlt 1934: 6, cp. Arlt o.J.: 126).

Although Arlt focuses on human individuality and cultural diversity, she drew up a list of basic needs common to all people, even though they might vary in age and special life situations. This is an important decision because it links up with universal human rights and demands that can be deduced there from.² In addition her structure of needs is not hierarchically oriented (Maslow), but built on interconnections. This means that every element must be seen both as cause and effect of the temporary form of a need or manner of needs satisfaction.

While the generally valid basic needs can vary according to age and special life situations, the forms of satisfaction appear in manifold individually and culturally determined forms. If, according to Arlt the appropriate satisfaction of these needs that lead to wellbeing is measurable, then non-wellbeing can also be determined. Neediness exists when one or more of the 13 basic needs are not met, not adequately or hardly met (cp. Arlt 1933: 66). Such a need deficiency can also be determined among well-educated people who are financially and socially well off, because having these resources does not mean that the well being of individual is promoted in the individual, social, ecological and economical sense.

Arlt's goal to enable and promote individually appropriate forms of need satisfaction starts with the exact observation and assessment of the naturally and culturally imprinted individual life story. According to Arlt the investigation of needy people needs to recognize: „three

components, not two, are needed for the understanding of human beings, 1. Genetics, 2. Life story, 3. Milieu.“ (Arlt 1932b: 1636)

5 Measuring needs and forms of need satisfaction on the individual

Arlt argues that poverty and neediness are dynamic and process phenomena, therefore the present condition a needy person finds himself in must be complemented by the individual history of poverty. The current form of neediness is usually the consequence of earlier lack of satisfaction. The needs of later years are composed of the following elements:

„1. Normal requirements of the respective age level;

2. The need to make up for or compensate for missed satisfaction in the past;

3. The need for satisfaction of disproportionately increased needs that were not met in the past.“ (Arlt 1933: 68)

According to Arlt the determination of an exact point of least resistance (Arlt 1934: 16) is of utmost importance for the precise measurement of neediness or emergency. It signals the extreme level below which satisfaction should not sink without risking damage to other needs of the individual and damage to the environment or offspring.

The assessment of the point of least resistance can be made through two different approaches. On the one hand the level of satisfaction can be anticipated from the situation of the individual, on the other hand the means at the disposal of the individual for needs satisfaction can be analyzed. For Arlt means include material and financial, but also time resources and skills as well as striving for purpose (cp. Arlt 1921: 47ff.). The lack of one of these means can suffice to impede need satisfaction. Furthermore the boundary line of each case between sensible simplicity and destructive deprivation must be defined, how it affects both the psyche and the body of a person, if an observed lack is the consequence of a temporary or permanent voluntary or forced renouncement, and if it is a sign of an increasing or decreasing poverty process. Further we have to determine if the lack is due to technological progress or to improved support created by the increase of the currently accepted *„border-line of misery“* in society (cp. Arlt 1948: 19, Arlt 1932b: 1635). Arlt defines *„border-line of misery“* as the highest level of deprivation tolerated by a culture in a given time (cp. Arlt 1933: 65).

With the help of the two methods of assessment both the individual case can be captured and an incredible variety of poverty facts can be determined. This method of investigation may also be used to monitor and evaluate welfare services. For instance a comparison between different institutions can only be made appropriately, if the impact or neglect of all needs are compared (cp. Arlt 1925: 151).

The strong sensitization for such a complex assessment process was the pivot of Arlt's education concept with respect to content and method as well didactics: *„How much misfortune in the relationships of people occurs from the wrong application of causality, to assume that every effect only has one cause – the most likely one! (...) An ... unconscious process of stereotyping has damaging effects in welfare observation. Therefore the attention of the student must be drawn to the differences, to the individual right from the start.*“ (Arlt 1926: 171f.)

Arlt saw her concept of need and need satisfaction assessment not only as a method for the means of poverty care assessment. In addition the method can also be used to gain factual material for research purposes that have to be analyzed and interpreted in order to draw conclusions for prevention measures for the welfare of all citizens. Consequently Arlt asked for the collection and analysis of various natural and socio-cultural causes and influences that could become „a general fate“ for an individual lifestyle such as:

- „a) weather, climatic differences, heating and clothing requirements;
- b) harvest, according to amount, quality, time;
- c) price index;
- d) employment in industry, small trade and agriculture;
- e) extent of women's labour in industry, in particular of mothers;
- f) housing market, frequency of illnesses; h) progress in medicine;
- i) demographic development, infant mortality, births, still births, marriages;
- j) use of pawn offices, bankruptcy, executions;
- k) number of school children and the amount of those who achieved entrance to a commercial school etc.;
- l) legal situation, new laws, frequency of criminal offences; m) existing labor law;
- n) transportation;
- o) inventions, radio, cinema and every intention that has strongly impacted the condition of the workers.“ (Arlt 1932b: 1636)

There are more or less extensive collections of many topics listed here in the estate of the „Collections of Ilse Arlt“, also called by Arlt „Studies for the Research of Everyday Life“ (Arlt 1958: 111).

In order to do justice to the principle of appropriateness for the individual in the process of support design, the welfare or social workers should never lose sight of the principally unlimited possibilities and opportunities for creating a life of wellbeing: „The most minute differences between people – reflected in the different skin lines of a thumb – require an unlimited variety of all details in lifestyle.“ (Arlt 1948: 19)

Arlt's research question: „How can a healthy, future-oriented, pleasurable lifestyle be achieved?“ (Arlt 1948: 19) is not merely individualistic, but also socially oriented, because she wanted to enable a socially and environmentally acceptable form of individualism for everybody (cp. Mitterer 1956). This becomes evident in her definition of a people- and welfare-oriented care system:

„ People Care is a method of providing support that analyzes afflictions and poverty and designs a proper economic system by taking into consideration all basic needs as well as

ethnological customs and traditions. People care also includes socio-political measures, mainly labour protection, all public health prevention and a large part of the economic administration measures. Without these people care is not possible; however, they are all weakened in their effectiveness due to a lack of understanding how to apply them and inadequate cooperation. Therefore they need people care to fill the gaps.“ (Arlt 1921: 79, FN 1) This concept of people, welfare or life care is essential for all levels of society and is only related to poverty care, because the demands for the needy can only be achieved with economic support. *“People care does not wait to be approached, it offers its services directly and seeks access to those who need help without even knowing it.”* (Arlt 1921: 94)

The end of this quote expresses Arlt’s understanding of preventive and educational welfare and people care as found in her many publications. She pursued the dissemination of her explicitly not only expert-focused results of the teaching and research collections on various topics of individual and political life quality promotion in several presentations and touring exhibitions.

6 Ilse Arlt as a representative of the first-wave feminism

In her need and need satisfaction focused poverty and wellbeing research Arlt drew attention to a sphere of life that had so far not been researched: life and household management and ecology. She thus concentrated on the research of a field that belonged primarily to women, was not paid and totally undervalued from an economic viewpoint. Arlt shed light on this field of action that is essential for human wellbeing, also with the idea of exploring the possibilities of fulfilled and paid work for women: *„It is still unnoticed – but the signs are growing that a new profession is beginning to emerge from the traditional female helper’s role, from the desire of young women to study, and from the new obligation of women to earn money.”* (Arlt 1911a: 22) With this position Arlt is the classical representative of the first-wave of the Women’s Movement whose goal was to integrate women and their care and household skills within their gender-based roles into society, to expand their sphere of influence and degree of participation, and eventually to have a harmonizing impact on social and political conflicts.

To what extent Arlt positions her welfare- and people care-oriented approach and the corresponding educational institution in this belief, is expressed in the following statement, written after 25 years existence of her school: *„We may see our existence as the proof that welfare has validity (...) The system has been designed to be part of the scientific work of female creation and it shows the inherent laws of female thinking and promotes the application of female thinking which will one day together with the male thinking produce a human way of thinking.”* (Arlt 1937: 15)

Arlt considered the improvement of life care, rational household management and sustainable consumer behaviour first and foremost as a woman’s task. The treasures of century-old knowledge of women should be scientifically studied with the goal of eventually transforming male thinking to human thinking. It should be mentioned that Arlt already pointed out in the *“Foundations of Welfare”* (1921) that the welfare and care profession should be extended to men as well. In 1921 she wrote under the heading *„Male Professions in People Care“*: *„An education for men in people care would be necessary, in which only the traditional female tasks of infant care, cooking and handicraft were excluded and replaced by sports and teacher training in gymnastics, and other manual work.”* (Arlt 1921: 122)

This statement makes it clear that Arlt favoured a traditional gender-based role division and saw infant care, cooking, and handicraft (but not household work in general) as mainly women's jobs. However, she did not endorse an essentialist gender-role concept, but took a pragmatic stand with respect to changing gender roles, as can be seen from a statement in 1914: „*Restricting the freedom of work for women not needed in welfare work is unfounded and harmful. (...) There should be concentrated effort to do welfare work and to do it well ... (This does not mean that such an education and training would not be beneficial for boys!).*” (Arlt 1914: 32).

Without doubt Arlt favoured the upgrading and public appreciation of women's contribution to care and welfare work. However, she was particularly attentive to safeguarding a life of wellbeing for infants and children who represented the next generation. In several articles from professional magazines and newspapers she deals with issues of relief from household chores of working women, meaning work/life balance, multiple burdens of working women in vulnerable living conditions and the coinciding endangering of infants, small children and family life. With reference to professional literature on the importance of breastfeeding and to negative international experience of crèches she advocated in 1904 the implementation of legal protection for mothers with infants to free them of factory work during the first year to stay at home with the child: “... *if one wants to help the child, one must help the mother. (...) First family life should be supported by public allowances, insurances for mothers, money paid to mothers for the care of their children and so on. (...) A definite advantage of a mother's insurance would be the monitoring by a doctor, instead of the still existing prejudices and charlatanry.*” (Arlt 1904: 50)

Even if it may be surprising from today's viewpoint that Ilse Arlt did not take the next step despite her pleading for a care education also for boys, she can still be seen as the indirect pioneer of the legal provision for the division of responsibility for household, care, income, and education in Austria in 1996 (according to the demands of the second-wave feminism) which, however, does not deal with the problem of the double burden of single mothers and fathers. Arlt's articles show that she not only promoted a legal framework, but also a life care education for both genders incorporated in the curriculum at all school levels – a request which is still more or less a desideratum.

Historically speaking the closing down of the „*Unified Professional Courses for People Care*“, Arlt's death and the new demands of the second-wave feminism in which the topics of life and household management and ecology have lost attraction for women are in close proximity. Arlt's lack of an academic background might be seen as a further reason that her approach has been forgotten.

Nevertheless, professional social work owes its beginnings to the endeavours of the first-wave feminism and its field of action continues to be where people for whatever reasons do not (yet) or no longer succeed in managing their lives with their resources. In current theories of social work that emphasize the life-world or everyday world approach, the ecological perspective (Thiersch 1992, Germain/Gitterman 1996), the systemic (cp. Frey) or the need orientation (Staub-Bernasconi 1995, Obrecht 1999) perspectives have been once more becoming the centre of attention in thinking and action that the reader of Arlt's works might be familiar with.

Re-reading Arlt's work, points to numerous connections between seemingly new approaches and creative achievements from a pioneering era in social work. The translation of Arlt's

„*Wege zu einer Fürsorgewissenschaft*“ into English is currently undertaken by Edith Singer. Moreover, the debate and discourse over Arlt’s publications and material, currently only existing in German in the „*Collections of Ilse Arlt*“³, offer a rich inspiration for creative answers to the basic question of social work: „*How can a healthy, future-oriented, pleasurable lifestyle be achieved?*“ (Arlt 1948: 19).

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