Kirsten Lornsen:
„Communities of Practice“ in Community Development – Participation in socially disadvantaged living areas. Satzwerk Verlag, Göttingen 2011.

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Summary

In the 1990s social segregation and discrimination rose considerably. Following this development, increasingly more socially disadvantaged housing areas came into being. In order to counteract problems caused by this social segregation, in 1998 the joint federal and state project "Socially Integrative City" was created. Participating in the implementation of this project was the Community Development. Traditionally the aim of Community Development is to improve the living conditions of those living in socially disadvantaged areas. The participation of the inhabitants of socially disadvataged city areas in societal (re)integration processes is an integral part of the "Socially Integrative City" programme as well as the Community Development. The usual practice of participation is based mostly on offers that are limited thematically and in time. Concerning the realization of such projects problems arose regarding the fact that the population either participated in these offers only half-heartedly or not at all. This fact, however, does not mean that the inhabitants of the concerned city areas are inactive or uninvolved. They are – in opposition to formally and initiated participation offers – active in informal social networks. These informal social networks where coined as *Communities of Practice,* or CoPs, by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. CoPs are considered knowledge communities – or, more precisely put, learning communities – whose members gather to solve the problems of daily life. CoPs develop and exist everywhere. In contrast to formal participatory offers it is the members of a given CoP who determine the time frame of its existence (it could be months or even years), as well as its thematic content. CoPs can be described as natural networks of social knowledge. In accordance CoPs can be seen as forms of genuine social participation, in which social – and simultaniously societal – reality is beeing created.

Herein lies the starting point for the topic of this paper: The reality-construing and structuring atributes of CoPs suggest to pursue the question in how far Gemeinwesensarbeit can better attain its sociopolitical and sociopedagogical (participatory) aims, when Communities of Practice are perceived and supported as "natural" forms of participation.

This is why the question is raised if the informal structures of Communities of Practice can or could pose as an additional (key) concept in the participation of disadvantaged population groups and – ideally – in the solving of societal problems. In order to pursue this question, regular meetings of two groups have been participatorily observed: an open meeting of women and a language course for Russian speakers. Both groups constitute examples of Communities of Practice. They meet in an institution wich is situated in a part of town which has been taken on by the programm "Socially Integrative City" as a programme area. Furthermore the levels of the

professionally-active pedagogists in that part of town, as well as the political-administrative view on socially disadvantaged living areas have been added into the research. The background for taking all the aforementioned levels into account, is the following: The focus of reconstructive social research is pointed towards the discovery of the societal genesis of social reality. This means that in order to understand social reality and its problems, a combination (triangulation) and reconstruction of all perspectives which participate in the genesis of social reality (reality structuring) is required.

The methodological basis for this research is the Grounded Theory. First, contextual information with regards to the Community Development and political-administrative levels will be examined. Herein the focus is set on understanding the (historical) development of those aspects which in the view of the Community Development and the sociopolitical level are understood as Inhabitant Participation. For the level of the group members the key or core category of "affiliation structures" in their different implementations (external and internal) could be formulated as a result. The handling of topics and the solution of problems within those CoPs is always directly influenced by the individual's cultural experiences. For the sociopedagogical and the political–administrative level, "homogenisation" presented itself to be the key or core category. This core category is being discussed and theoretically refined with regards to the model of "established outsider figurations" which was developed by Norbert Elias. The key or core category of the different "affiliation structures" as they are formulated for the level of the group members can be linked to the category of homogenisation as well, because the different affiliation structures are also forms of homogenisation.