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Professional Responses to Adolescent Sexuality in Social Work Settings: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Group Discussions Using Case Vignettes

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Abstract

This study examines how social work professionals respond to situations involving adolescent sexuality (ages 14-15) across three institutional settings in Germany: refugee accommodation facilities, school social work, and residential youth care. Using qualitative content analysis [1], we analyzed 12 group discussions in which practitioners responded to standardized case vignettes depicting consensual sexual activity between adolescents. Drawing on professionalization theory, particularly Helsper's concept of antinomies in professional action and Kessl and Maurer's notion of social work as boundary work (Grenzbearbeitung), we identified 11 main categories of professional reasoning and over 40 emergent themes. Results reveal three distinct professional orientations: legal-normative, relationship-centered, and systemic-mediating approaches. Practitioners consistently prioritized adolescent autonomy and wellbeing while navigating tensions between legal frameworks, cultural considerations, parental expectations, and institutional constraints. The analysis suggests that professional responses to adolescent sexuality are shaped by setting-specific demands but share common patterns of boundary negotiation. We discuss implications for professional education, including the potential role of 'cool-out' processes in the transition from training to practice, and argue for greater attention to developmental-psychological knowledge and explicit ethical reasoning in social work curricula.

Introduction

Social workers regularly encounter complex situations involving adolescent sexuality that require careful professional judgment. These situations raise fundamental questions about professional responsibility: Which needs are recognized as legitimate? Which topics are marked as falling within the domain of social work—and which are systematically excluded? The answers to these questions are by no means neutral but reflect processes of norm-setting that have implications for both individual clients and the democratic legitimacy of social work as a profession [2].

In Germany, where this study was conducted, the legal framework permits consensual sexual activity between adolescents from age 14, provided no coercion or exploitation occurs (§176 StGB). This legal clarity might suggest straightforward professional responses. However, practitioners must navigate a complex terrain where legal norms intersect with cultural expectations, institutional constraints, parental concerns, and the developmental needs of young people. As Helsper [3] has argued, professional action in pedagogical fields is characterized by fundamental antinomies—structural contradictions that cannot be resolved but must be managed reflectively.

The question of whether and how sexuality constitutes a legitimate domain of social work intervention has received surprisingly little empirical attention. While sexual education, contraception counseling, and protection from sexual violence are established components of social work practice, the recognition of sexuality as a professional concern varies considerably across settings and target populations. Research on reproductive health among refugee women, for example, has documented systematic de-thematization of sexuality-related needs in accommodation facilities [4]. This raises the question: How do professionals actually reason about adolescent sexuality when confronted with specific situations?

This study addresses this gap by analyzing how social work practitioners respond to case vignettes depicting adolescent sexuality across three institutional settings: refugee accommodation facilities, school social work, and residential youth care. Our research questions are: (1) What professional orientations do social workers employ when addressing adolescent sexuality? (2) How do institutional contexts shape professional responses? (3) What tensions and dilemmas emerge in professional reasoning about adolescent sexuality?

Theoretical Framework

Social work as boundary work (Grenzbearbeitung)

Kessl and Maurer [2,5] have proposed that social work can be understood as a form of 'boundary work' (Grenzbearbeitung). In this conceptualization, social work operates at the intersections of control and empowerment, welfare-state normalization and participatory life-world orientation. Boundaries are not fixed demarcations but negotiable social relations that practitioners must constantly navigate and, in some cases, actively reshape.

This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding professional responses to adolescent sexuality. Practitioners must negotiate multiple boundaries simultaneously: between protection and autonomy, between institutional mandates and individual needs, between cultural norms and legal frameworks, and between professional distance and relational engagement. The concept of boundary work draws attention to the fundamentally ambivalent position of social work—neither purely emancipatory nor purely controlling, but constantly navigating between these poles.

Importantly, boundary work includes the power to define which needs are recognized as legitimate and which are rendered invisible. Drawing on Foucault's analytics of power, Anhorn, Bettinger, and Stehr [6] have shown how social work participates in discursive mechanisms of control that establish visibility regimes—determining what can be seen, spoken about, and addressed professionally. The (non-)thematization of certain needs can thus be understood as a process of norm-setting with democratic implications: A social work that cannot or will not respond to certain needs risks undermining trust in democratic institutions [7].

Antinomies of professional action

Helsper [3] has identified structural antinomies that characterize professional action in pedagogical fields. These include the tensions between proximity and distance, between organization and interaction, between subsumption and reconstruction, between autonomy and heteronomy, and between differentiation and unity. Unlike mere dilemmas that might be resolved through better information or more careful reasoning, antinomies represent fundamental contradictions inherent to professional work that can only be managed through reflective practice.

For social work with adolescent sexuality, several antinomies are particularly salient. The autonomy-heteronomy antinomy manifests when practitioners must balance respect for adolescents' self-determination with protective responsibilities and parental rights. The proximity-distance antinomy emerges when building trusting relationships that enable disclosure while maintaining professional boundaries. The subsumption-reconstruction antinomy appears when applying general legal or institutional rules to unique individual situations that may not fit predetermined categories.

Recognizing these antinomies as structural rather than situational has important implications. It suggests that the tensions practitioners experience are not failures of professional competence but inherent features of the work itself. Professional expertise lies not in eliminating these tensions but in recognizing and managing them reflectively [8].

Adolescent sexuality as a developmental phenomenon

From a developmental-psychological perspective, sexual interest and activity during adolescence represent normal aspects of human development [9]. The emergence of sexuality is closely connected to identity formation, autonomy development, and the establishment of intimate relationships outside the family of origin. Professional responses to adolescent sexuality therefore cannot be separated from broader questions about supporting healthy development.

However, professional responses are influenced not only by developmental knowledge but also by personal values, institutional policies, and cultural norms [10]. Research has documented considerable variation in how social workers approach sexuality-related issues, with some evidence suggesting systematic avoidance or de-legitimization of sexuality as a professional concern in certain settings. This variation raises questions about the factors that shape professional reasoning and the consequences for young people whose needs may go unrecognized.

Setting-specific considerations

The institutional context in which social work takes place shapes both the challenges practitioners face and the resources available for addressing them. Three settings are particularly relevant for this study:

Refugee accommodation facilities present unique challenges related to cultural diversity, language barriers, and the precarious life situations of residents. Practitioners must navigate between respect for cultural values and adherence to German legal frameworks, often in conditions of spatial constraint where privacy is limited and family conflicts can escalate quickly [4].

School social work operates within educational institutions with their own mandates and hierarchies. School social workers typically have limited authority and must coordinate with teachers, administrators, and parents. The school setting also brings specific challenges related to peer dynamics and digital media.

Residential youth care involves 24-hour relationships with young people, often with complex histories that led to out-of-home placement. Practitioners in these settings must balance intensive relationship work with professional boundaries, manage relationships with biological families, and navigate institutional rules about sexuality and relationships.

The German legal framework

German law provides a clear framework for adolescent sexuality. Section 176 of the Criminal Code (StGB) establishes the age of sexual consent at 14, provided the activity is consensual and does not involve exploitation of a position of dependency. Section 8a of the Social Code Book VIII (SGB VIII) establishes procedures for child protection assessment when there are indications of endangerment. The minimum age for marriage is 18, with no exceptions, following legislative changes in 2017.

This legal framework provides practitioners with important orientation. However, legal permissibility does not resolve the professional questions of how to respond supportively, how to assess risk, how to engage with families, or how to balance competing considerations. The law establishes boundaries but does not prescribe professional action within those boundaries.

Method

Research design

This study employed qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz [1], combining deductive and inductive approaches. This method was chosen for its systematic approach to analyzing large amounts of textual data while remaining open to emergent themes not anticipated in the initial coding framework.

Sample and data collection

Participants were social work practitioners recruited through professional networks in southwestern Germany. Six groups of practitioners participated, with each group discussing two of three case vignettes, yielding 12 recorded group discussions. Discussions lasted between 7 and 31 minutes and were conducted in German. All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Case vignettes

Three case vignettes were developed to represent typical situations across the three settings. All vignettes involved adolescents aged 14-15 engaging in consensual sexual activity, with no indicators of coercion or exploitation:

Case 1 (Refugee Accommodation): Mira (14) and Leo (15) live with their families in a shared refugee accommodation facility. Both families belong to a Roma community that rejects sexuality outside marriage and favors early marriage. After it becomes known that Mira and Leo had sexual intercourse, conflict erupts between the families. Police are called to de-escalate the situation.

Case 4 (School Social Work): A screenshot is circulating in a class chat group in which a female student claims that Lea (14) had sex with Tom (15) for the first time yesterday. There are no indications of coercion; both are described as being in a relationship.

Case 5 (Residential Care): Lina (14) lives in a residential youth care facility. Her mother calls early in the morning, upset, claiming that Lina had sex with her boyfriend Max (15). The mother demands a contact prohibition and threatens to file a police report.

Analysis

Analysis proceeded in five phases: (1) initial reading and memo-writing; (2) development of a deductive coding framework based on the theoretical framework, comprising 11 main categories; (3) systematic coding of all transcripts; (4) inductive identification of themes not captured by the initial framework; and (5) category-based and case-based analysis. Over 200 passages were coded across the 11 main categories, with an additional 40+ emergent themes identified inductively.

The 11 main categories were: (1) Working Methods, (2) Role Clarification, (3) Legal Framework and Child Protection, (4) Sexuality as Topic, (5) Cultural and Religious Aspects, (6) Role of Parents/Families, (7) Adolescent Self-Determination, (8) Institutional Responsibilities and Cooperation, (9) Data Protection and Media Literacy, (10) Housing and Spatial Solutions, and (11) Documentation and Team Communication.

Method

Category-Based findings

Legal framework as orientation anchor

The legal framework emerged as a central reference point across all discussions (37 codings). Practitioners consistently invoked the legal legitimacy of consensual sexual activity from age 14 as a foundation for their reasoning:

"In Germany, young people from age 14 are allowed to have sex with someone else, provided that both want it and are not pressured or forced." (Case 1, Group B)

Importantly, legal knowledge served not merely as information but as an argumentative resource against excessive demands from parents or institutions. When confronted with a mother demanding police action, practitioners responded:

"We are not in a position to file a report... on what legal basis?" (Case 5, Group B)

The legal framework also established clear limits. Practitioners consistently distinguished between legally permissible sexual activity and other concerns such as potential forced marriage, which several groups identified as a risk requiring intervention:

"Marriage is prohibited in Germany. You can only marry from age 18, and there are no more exceptions." (Case 1, Group G)

Role clarification and boundary work

Role clarification emerged as a significant theme, particularly in the residential care setting (22 codings). Practitioners engaged in explicit boundary work, defining what fell within and outside their professional mandate:

"Say that this is not our job... that we are not responsible for prohibiting contact and that we are also not responsible for filing a report." (Case 5, Group B)

A recurring metaphor distinguished social work facilities from controlling institutions:

"We are not a prison here where she only has one hour of yard time per day." (Case 5, Group E)

This boundary work extended to clarifying the primary client orientation. Practitioners consistently positioned themselves as advocates for the young people rather than as agents of parental or institutional control:

"Our mandate is the wellbeing of the client." (Case 5, Group B)
"But we as social workers are here for the kids first." (Case 1, Group F)

Working methods and sequential intervention

Practitioners demonstrated a high level of methodological awareness (28 codings). A consistent pattern emerged: separate conversations with adolescents should precede any family involvement, allowing for assessment without external pressure:

"Start with Mira and Leo, start with separate conversations, then together if they want that." (Case 1, Group A)

Groups developed staged intervention models with clear escalation pathways:

"First parents and professionals, second young people and professionals, third professionals among themselves for exchange, and then possible steps—what next?" (Case 1, Group B)

Adolescent self-determination

Respect for adolescent autonomy was a central value across discussions (20 codings). Practitioners emphasized the right to self-determination while recognizing the need to assess for coercion:

"We placed value on the self-determination rights of the young people, the right to free development." (Case 1, Group B)

"She is self-determined. In her free time, we cannot decide what she does or who she is with. We are not responsible for that." (Case 5, Group B)

However, practitioners also recognized the limits of autonomy when external pressure was present:

"That would also be a criterion to say okay, we notice these young people cannot develop freely, they are being oppressed." (Case 1, Group B)

Setting-specific patterns

Refugee accommodation: cultural complexity and risk assessment

Discussions of Case 1 were dominated by cultural considerations (19 codings) and risk assessment (15 codings). Practitioners grappled with the tension between cultural sensitivity and legal norms. The boundary work here was particularly challenging, as practitioners had to navigate between respect for cultural values and their duty to protect young people's rights:

"We are in Germany. Here it is very much the case that these young people are quite allowed to have sexual intercourse outside of marriage, regardless of culture." (Case 1, Group B)

At the same time, practitioners showed awareness of the need for cultural sensitivity:

"For us it's hard to imagine because I think none of us come from such a community... that's their culture and you have to somehow think within their framework." (Case 1, Group F)

Risk assessment focused on potential consequences including honor violence, family expulsion, and forced marriage. Practitioners demonstrated practice knowledge about specific risks:

"Not in Germany. But that actually often happens in other countries. We've had a young person where it was in the room that she would be forced into marriage." (Case 1, Group D)

Spatial solutions were prominent (14 codings), including family separation, facility transfers, and notably one group's suggestion to create spaces for intimacy:

"...that you create a space for intimacy, because privacy is simply not available there anyway." (Case 1, Group E)

School social work: privacy and media literacy

In Case 4, practitioners reframed the issue from sexuality to privacy violation. Data protection and media literacy dominated the discussions (15 codings):

"In the end, it's really about the fact that there's a rumor about her at all whether it's true or not doesn't really matter. It's about the class getting involved in something that should actually be private." (Case 4, Group F)

Groups developed staged intervention models: (1) individual conversation with Lea, (2) separate conversation with Tom, (3) identify the screenshot source, (4) media education with the class, (5) parental involvement only if escalation. Practitioners explicitly denied any obligation to inform parents:

"So I think you have to inform them anyway. No. School social work, definitely not." (Case 4, Group A)

The boundary work here involved defining the limits of school social work authority while emphasizing the importance of media literacy education:

"Work with the class, with social learning around media, media use. What can happen. Do a bit of education." (Case 4, Group A)

Residential care: parent management and institutional framework

Case 5 discussions centered on role clarification (16 codings) and managing the upset mother (14 codings). Practitioners developed strategies for de-escalation while maintaining boundaries:

"If I give the mother a blunt refusal now, she might act on her own, because she's calling in some kind of angry frenzy!" (Case 5, Group B)

Critical reflection on the mother's behavior was prominent:

"I find it a bit intrusive of her that she now makes this speculation and sets all this in motion." (Case 5, Group D)

Some facilities had explicit protocols for managing adolescent sexuality, revealing institutionalized boundary work:

"At our place we have very clear guidelines... they have to be together for a certain time before they can even meet at our place... six weeks... and only once the contraception is working... then only with permission from both parents can they even go to the room." (Case 5, Group D)

Documentation and team communication were emphasized (7 codings), reflecting the institutional complexity of residential care:

"I would be caught off guard. I wouldn't be able to say clearly... document everything exactly as it happened." (Case 5, Group B)

Emergent themes

Inductive analysis identified over 40 themes not captured by the initial framework. These clustered into seven areas:

Developmental-psychological perspectives

Practitioners drew on developmental knowledge to normalize adolescent sexuality:

"That they had sex with each other is normal adolescent behavior... the young people just have a normal sex drive that you simply have at that age." (Case 1, Group E)

Importantly, this knowledge served as an argumentative resource against excessive intervention. Several groups noted the counterproductive effects of prohibition:

"Because if the contact is forbidden, she'll do it anyway and then maybe there's an even higher incentive to meet. It often happens when you say okay, we forbid it. They find their ways to see each other." (Case 5, Group D)

Professional self-reflection

Practitioners openly discussed their own limitations and emotional reactions:

"I would be caught off guard. I wouldn't know, I couldn't say clearly, I wouldn't be clear on my legal situation right now." (Case 5, Group B)

This extended to realistic assessment of intervention limits:

"I notice that sometimes there's just no possibility to really address it properly. If some people want to act that way... then our hands are tied too." (Case 1, Group D)

This acknowledgment of limits can be interpreted as a sign of professional maturity recognizing the structural constraints on professional action rather than attributing all difficulties to personal inadequacy.

Culture-specific practice knowledge

Practitioners demonstrated experiential knowledge about specific cultural practices relevant to risk assessment:

"There are actually operations to restore the hymen so that the woman is 'pure' again." (Case 1, Group D)

They also recognized the ambivalent role of community both as a source of support and potential pressure:

"They come to another country, there they have a community that catches them a bit... these people who have fled have practically no family, no security." (Case 1, Group D)

Professional orientations

Analysis revealed three ideal-typical professional orientations:

Legal-normative orientation is characterized by strong reference to legal frameworks, clear boundary demarcation, and emphasis on the limits of professional authority. Practitioners with this orientation frequently cite legal provisions and use law as a shield against excessive demands.

Relationship-centered orientation focuses on trust relationships with young people, participatory approaches, and protection of autonomy. Practitioners emphasize the primary relationship with the adolescent and view their role as advocacy rather than control.

Systemic-mediating orientation attends to all stakeholders young people, families, institutions and seeks to mediate between competing interests. Practitioners with this orientation develop collaborative solutions that address multiple perspectives.

Most practitioners demonstrated elements of multiple orientations, suggesting these represent analytical distinctions rather than fixed categories. The dominant orientation appeared to shift based on situational demands, with legal-normative reasoning prominent when facing unreasonable demands and relationship-centered reasoning emphasized when supporting adolescents directly.

Discussion

Boundary work in practice

Our findings illustrate how practitioners engage in continuous boundary work when responding to adolescent sexuality. Consistent with Kessl and Maurer's [2] theoretical framework, practitioners navigated between control and empowerment, using legal knowledge not as a simple prescription but as a resource for defining and defending their professional position. The explicit boundary-setting observed in the residential care discussions distinguishing social work facilities from prisons exemplifies this negotiation.

The boundary work was setting-specific. In refugee accommodation, the central boundary negotiation involved cultural norms and legal frameworks. In school social work, it centered on institutional authority and privacy rights. In residential care, it focused on parent-professional relationships and institutional rules. This variation confirms that boundary work is contextually shaped while maintaining common structural features.

Managing antinomies

The professional reasoning observed reflects ongoing management of antinomies rather than their resolution [3]. The autonomy-heteronomy antinomy was particularly prominent: practitioners affirmed adolescent self-determination while recognizing circumstances (coercion, cultural pressure) where protection might override autonomy. The proximity-distance antinomy appeared in discussions of trust-building and professional boundaries.

Importantly, practitioners demonstrated reflective awareness of these tensions rather than attempting to deny them. The acknowledgment of feeling 'caught off guard' and having 'hands tied' suggests professional maturity in recognizing structural limits. This aligns with Helsper's argument that professional competence lies in managing rather than eliminating antinomies.

The Question of legitimacy

Our findings suggest that practitioners in this sample recognized adolescent sexuality as a legitimate domain of professional concern. They developed differentiated intervention strategies, emphasized respectful engagement, and positioned themselves as advocates for young people's developmental needs. This stands in contrast to research documenting systematic de-thematization of sexuality in some practice settings [4]

This discrepancy raises important questions about the transition from training to practice. Kersting's [11] concept of 'cool-out' developed in nursing contexts may offer explanatory potential. Cool-out describes processes through which engaged professionals learn, over the course of their careers, to exclude certain needs from their attention in order to remain capable of action under institutional constraints, time pressure, and discursive dominance of particular approaches.

If practitioners enter the field with differentiated approaches to adolescent sexuality but subsequently learn to de-thematize these concerns, this represents a form of moral desensitization with significant implications for service users. The question then becomes: How can professional education prepare practitioners to resist cool-out processes while acknowledging real institutional constraints? This may require explicit attention to the antinomies of professional action, teaching practitioners to recognize structural tensions as inherent to the work rather than as personal failures to be resolved.

The role of developmental knowledge

The emergent theme of developmental-psychological knowledge deserves particular attention. Practitioners who invoked developmental frameworks were able to normalize adolescent sexuality in ways that supported both professional reasoning and communication with parents. The recognition that prohibitions may be counterproductive invoking the 'forbidden fruit' dynamic— demonstrates sophisticated developmental reasoning.

This suggests that developmental-psychological knowledge serves not merely as background information but as an active argumentative resource. Professional education might benefit from more explicit integration of developmental perspectives, showing how such knowledge can be mobilized in professional reasoning and communication.

Implications for professional education

Our findings point to several implications for social work education:

Legal knowledge as resource: Practitioners used legal frameworks not as constraints but as tools for professional positioning. Education should emphasize not just knowledge of relevant law but practice in using legal knowledge argumentatively.

Antinomy recognition: Teaching practitioners to recognize structural tensions as inherent to professional work may help prevent the attribution of systemic problems to personal inadequacy a potential driver of cool-out.

Setting-specific competencies: Different settings require different skill emphases: cultural competence and risk assessment in refugee work, media literacy in school settings, parent management in residential care.

Ethical reasoning practice: The dilemma situations in the vignettes generated rich ethical reasoning. Case-based learning that engages practitioners with complex, value-laden situations may build capacity for reflective practice [12,13].

Norm reflection: Explicit attention to setting-specific norms including those that may lead to de-legitimization of certain needs could prepare practitioners to critically examine institutional taken-for-granteds [8].

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the vignette-based method captures stated rather than actual responses. How practitioners reason in discussions may differ from how they act in practice, particularly under time pressure and institutional constraint. Second, group discussion dynamics may have influenced responses, with participants potentially orienting to perceived group norms. Third, the German context with its specific legal framework establishing age 14 as the age of consent limits generalizability to contexts with different legal or cultural frameworks. Fourth, the sample was drawn from a single region in Germany and may not represent the full diversity of German social work practice. Finally, the study focused on practitioners' reasoning rather than outcomes for young people an important limitation given the ultimate concern with service user wellbeing.

Conclusion

This study examined how social work practitioners respond to adolescent sexuality across three institutional settings. Drawing on professionalization theory particularly the concepts of boundary work and antinomies we found that practitioners engage in sophisticated professional reasoning that balances legal frameworks, adolescent autonomy, parental concerns, and cultural contexts.

The setting-specific patterns identified highlight the contextual nature of professional competence. What constitutes appropriate professional response varies significantly across refugee accommodation, school social work, and residential care settings, even when the underlying situation consensual adolescent sexuality is similar. This variation reflects the different boundary work required in each context.

The emergent themes particularly developmental-psychological knowledge, professional self-reflection, and culture-specific practice knowledge extend our understanding of the resources practitioners draw upon. These themes suggest that professional reasoning about adolescent sexuality integrates multiple knowledge bases in contextually sensitive ways.

The identification of three professional orientations legal-normative, relationship-centered, and systemic-mediating provides a framework for understanding variation in professional approach. That most practitioners showed elements of multiple orientations suggests flexibility in professional stance that responds to situational demands.

The potential role of cool-out processes in the transition from training to practice deserves further investigation. If practitioners enter the field with differentiated approaches but subsequently learn to de-thematize sexuality-related concerns, understanding the mechanisms of this process could inform strategies for prevention. Professional education that explicitly addresses antinomies, teaches legal knowledge as argumentative resource, and provides practice with ethical reasoning may help build resilience against institutional pressures toward de-legitimization.

The German context, with its relatively clear legal framework establishing age 14 as the age of sexual consent, offers lessons for contexts where legal and cultural frameworks are less aligned. The practitioners in this study used legal clarity as a resource for professional positioning. In contexts where legal frameworks are more ambiguous or contested, different strategies may be needed.

Future research should examine how professional orientations develop over career trajectories, how the patterns identified translate into actual practice, and how international comparisons might illuminate the role of legal and cultural context in shaping professional responses to adolescent sexuality.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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