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SOCIAL WORK FAILURE? THE ISSUES OF SOCIAL WORK DEVELOPMENTS IN POSTMODERNITY

Abstract

This study deals with the current issues of social work mainly in the Czech and European contexts. It shows that the debate on social work crisis finds its roots of the crisis in social policy, and in structural, legislative and financial conditions it creates for social work. The study, therefore, suggests three questions that should be answered primarily by social work both as a practical profession and professional research, to be able to define its own professional interest.

Keywords: client's needs, social pedagogy, social policy, social services, social work, social work crisis

Abstrakt

Artykuł ten dotyczy współczesnych zagadnień pracy społecznej w kontekście Czech i Europy. Studium to wskazuje, że debata na temat kryzysu pracy społecznej ma swoje korzenie w polityce społecznej, w strukturalnych, prawnych i finansowych warunkach, jakie polityka stwarza pracy społecznej. Zatem, artykuł ten stawia tezę, że niezbędne jest znalezienie odpowiedzi na trzy pytania, zarówno w kontekście pracy społecznej jako dziedziny praktycznej jak i badania naukowego, tak, aby zdefiniować obszar profesjonalnego zainteresowania.

Słowa kluczowe: potrzeby klienta, pedagogika społeczna, polityka społeczna, usługi społeczne, praca społeczna, kryzys pracy społecznej

Introduction

In current public debate on social work in the Czech Republic we can hear not only “folk” but also expert opinions arguing there is a complex failure of social work. This complex failure lies in the fact that social work cannot provide useful methods and techniques for practice and that it became a purely theoretical discipline [Kopřivová, 2009: 7–9]. The consequence is that social workers are not able to prevent long-term and newly emerging social problems in practice.

The view that expresses reality aptly, however, is that social work in the Czech Republic is often reduced to social work with individuals or family, so the fact that social workers should work with their clients' environment is ignored: “We are not always sufficiently active and persistent when there is a need to change bad laws, prejudicial political decisions and discriminatory climate in the society” [Janebová, 2010: 35–37]. In the case of social work, we see that instead of problems' reasons we address their consequences. Social work is expected to solve the problems of “... acute effects of limited self-sufficiency of the poor or disadvantaged individuals” instead of which we should tackle the problem of “... failed social interactions of individuals, groups and organizations in a manner that involves simultaneous action on both ‘sides’ of the failed interaction”. Thus, social worker is not expected to be a “bridge” between people in trouble and society, but that he/she will tackle misery of people in need using social services and social benefits. It is believed that social services and benefits are the best way to cope with difficult situations in life. Social workers, therefore, do not help their clients to solve the causes of their lack.

According to Musil, social work faces three problems:

- problem which is otherwise commonly regarded as a subject of social work (failed interaction of individuals, groups or communities with their environment) is not recognized as a problem;

- social work is, therefore, not expected to act on both sides to mediate mutual adaptation between the disadvantaged and the society;
- social work is as a result considered to be something different from its original tradition and from what we see abroad.

According to Musil, social work in the CR slid backwards in its development, somewhere before its constitution as an independent practical field and academic discipline [Musil, 2010: 11–25]. What are the current social work issues that come from so defined problem?

First issue: Social work or social services?

In its broadest concept, social work is seen as a part of the government social policy [Matoušek, 2001: 11]. As a result of this approach, social work is generally understood through the prism of social services [Kozlová, 2005: 9–60]. Social work is then "... carried out in social services and via social services. Professional social workers are employed by social subjects to fulfil their social objectives, programs, plans or projects, i.e. to provide social objects (clients) with articles (benefits and services) to meet certain social needs. Through social work we realize a broad range of socio-political intentions, because it causes rising share of material benefits and services, especially in meeting specific social needs" [Tomeš, 2001: 179].

If social work is taken as a provision of social services, it is a much narrowed view: social services are understood as an offer of services, and client together with the social worker select the ones that can help to tackle client's problem. Services are set in a way that makes it possible to reduce or eliminate the problem which can be reduced or eliminated. So defined social work, however, diminishes the role of the social worker. It does not allow him/her to use different approaches and prevents him/her from active formation of social policy for example [Oláh, Schavel, Ondrušová, 2008: 75]. In fact, social worker only provides social services without asking what his/her client as a human really needs and whether there is one in the portfolio of social services that is suitable for client's particular situation. We also neglect a question whether the solution of client's situation cannot be found in changing the requirements that are placed on client by his/her social environment. The above outlined approach is thus largely technocratic.

Social work certainly helps significantly to implement the state social policy. However, social work shouldn't merge with it. We must realize that since the 1960s social work has been more and more under the control of the state, so such conceptions of social work which don't converge with social policy of the ruling political parties [Tomeš, 2001: 155] have virtually no chance of success [Matoušek, Šustová, 2011: 104]. Thus the main task of social work remains to keep the system functioning, instead of central focus on helping those who need it [Staub-Bernasconi, 2007: 20–53]. On one hand social work is to ensure social security and it still insists on solving problems privately [Chytil, 2007: 64–71]. Finally, the point is not to help a client, but rather to offer a menu of unified products to an interested taker for the service [Smutek, 2014:160–163].

Social service system obviously has a number of positives, especially it enables client to choose a service provider and choose from the menu of its services, which promotes the independence and dignity of the particular client. From the above mentioned it is clear that the social work's failure to solve a particular client's situation is not caused by its failure as a field that is incapable to offer enough practical methods and techniques. The point is to what extent social work will be domesticated by social policy and economized by the social services market. Social work should, therefore, rather ask about how to solve problems – not just through social services – that are in its competence.

Second issue: Educational or caring aspect of social work?

The current discourse about social work does not usually avoid concerning the strange relationship between social education and social work. Generally, however, this division is considered rather unfortunate, because by definition the direct assistance (social work competence) and educational aspect of assistance (social pedagogy competence) in practice and theory are linked [Engelke, 2004: 28]. The causes of dividing social work and social pedagogy must be sought particularly in history, when, at the time of the constitution of both disciplines, the assistance was divided according to whether it bears a caring or an educational aspect [Erler, 2004: 13].

Separating these two disciplines seems inappropriate for other reasons, too. Above all, the clientele of social work has changed so in fact it concerns all members of the society - everyone is potentially vulnerable to a risk. Social work also takes over many tasks that previously belonged exclusively to educational institutions. Both disciplines are, in fact, connected by the socialization process [Tokárová, 2009: 45–71]. We should not ignore though, that social education does not just lie in helping the disadvantaged youth. Its support is intended to everyone who gets in a difficult life situation or lives in a way that brings problems – a phenomenon that is becoming more or less common in the postmodern era [Papenkort, 2006: 102–109].

So the question is whether the orientation of social work almost exclusively on the caring aspect (direct assistance) is not actually counterproductive. To use the educational aspect in social work does not necessarily imply to see e.g. an adult client as a “small child”. If the client cannot do something, social work can not solve it just by “caring”; it is necessary to involve an appropriate “education”. If we involve the educational aspect or social pedagogy, we do not mean the paternalistic approach. The question for social work, therefore, is how to revive its educational aspect or how to supplement the current “caring” social work with the “educational” social education. The problem of “forcing out” the educational aspect of social work, therefore, ultimately leads to the question of the basic ideological orientation of social work.

Third issue: What is the orientation of social work?

Social work has to be – as the traditional definition of Alice Salomon reads – responsible for the “art of life” which means for the support and assistance in problems with the development of learning and life competencies, for the help to empowerment, etc. This traditional approach says that at first we should tackle problems people have with themselves, and secondly those problems the society has with the people in need [Thiersch, 2002: 32–34]. This concept oriented to the life world refers both to the tradition of social work and the social pedagogy. In this model, the task of social work is to secure social justice in life conditions in the context of changes, crises and stressful situations people are facing in their life. Because life conditions are socially conditioned, social work is bound to become politically engaged in changing social structures that affect the life worlds.

In contrast to this traditional approach, which is accentuated in the German-speaking environment, we can, e.g. in the Czech Republic, find a concept corresponding rather with an English-speaking environment: “Social work is a part of a state organized and supported system of distribution of resources and services to satisfy certain types of social needs of individuals, families, groups and communities, and to solve, manage or control behaviour considered to be socially problematic or deviant” [Banks, 2001: 15]. The performance of social work is largely dependent on the law and policy, as well as other regulations [Thompson, 2009: 31–56]. Therefore, in the CR, other parts of Europe or in the USA the individual autonomy of social worker is limited much more than e.g. in the case of a doctor or a lawyer [Banks, 2001: 14].

“Most social workers are either directly or indirectly employed by the local government; it has the function of social control, and therefore its primary concern is not to work honestly in the best interests of the user.” In the Czech context bluntly expressed by Janebová: “What do employers and state want from their employees above all? Obviously, loyalty. They want obedient workers who carry out their duties” [Janebová, 2010: 35–37]. But then it’s a question whether the work in favour of client’s best interests could be in focus of a social worker in a state office, state-funded or non-profit organization. Furthermore, in the background of legislative changes we can also find economic interests striving to open another area of sector rather than trying to work in the best interests of social work clients – citizens [Kozlová, 2003: 145–156]. Thus in this concept social work logically focuses primarily on clients’ deficits trying to eliminate or at least compensate them using benefits and services. “One is tempted to talk about forming a ‘mental apartheid against human need’ – at local, national and international level” [Staub-Bernasconi, 2007: 129].

The recipient of social work is a client – this perception has been obvious since the early 1990s. At the background of this concept, however, man is viewed as a bearer of the economic system resources. Focusing on the needs of social work recipient is thus denounced to the orientation to deficits. In case that social work focuses on human needs, its argumentation will go “bottom up” – i.e. from individually specific to socially general. The starting point will be then – to precise who is vulnerable. Only after this question is answered, you can inquire about the function of social work, in relation to recipients and in relation to society and founders or the operators of social services facilities [Staub-Bernasconi, 2007: 120].

The question for social work, therefore, is whether it really responds to the needs of its clients or just creates opportunities that are attractive to them, and therefore they seek out a social worker. This means, de facto, to ask how to respond to clients' needs in a different way than just by means of benefits and social services, whose portfolio was created "at the table" because it had to be made general enough.

Conclusion

The three basic issues for social work, which have been formulated, are based on deeper and broader problems that profoundly affect social work but they are not the problems of social work itself. These issues apparently show that the problems of social work and its identity arise mainly due to the current social policy.

It is obvious that the intention of the system of social policy and social services funding is a social worker who acts as a bridge between clients and their social environment. However, this task cannot be done only through social benefits and social services - despite the fact that helping organizations actually lobbied for this system of social services, eg. in the Czech Republic, to make their funding more transparent and fair. Thus, if social work in the Czech Republic did not have to care what services and benefits to distribute and how, it could focus on what are the needs of its clients. In relation to the second question, it does not mean that clients should judge their needs and determine what assistance and to what extent it will be provided to them. To assess clients' needs and the best way how to satisfy them is definitely in the competence of social work. For this reason, social work shouldn't be domesticated by social policy, neither national, regional nor local, as we have seen so far.

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