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CURRENT THEORETICAL AND APPLIED ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL WORK IN CONCEPTUALIZING THE PROBLEMS OF THE COMMUNITY

Abstract: This article analyses the current theoretical and applied aspects of social work in conceptualizing community problems. The community social work in theoretical and practical terms is one of the underdeveloped areas in Bulgaria. In this regard, we focus our research interest and attention on the issue of conceptualizing community social problems as one of the significant technological components that determine their successful dealing with them. Forming a clear conceptual scheme of community problems, building an appropriate framework for analysing and evaluating them creates the conditions for a comprehensive understanding of their nature, value and power, and their cultural determination. Conceptualizing and solving the community social problems contributes for designing and implementing social work models to solve them. They are based on the empowerment and active involvement of community members and the informed and competent provision of intervention to bring about change in their best interests and to achieve change and development.

Key words: community; community social work; community social problems; conceptualizing community problems; analysing and evaluating community problems; empowering the community; models for solving community problems.

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Introduction

The community social work as a macro practice and method requires an understanding of the power dynamics in the social relations of the interaction between different systems and is oriented towards the achievement of social justice and development through structural change. Depending on the specifics of the problems, the social worker focuses on factors of a certain nature (social, political, economic, infrastructural, educational, etc.), such factors play major role in the occurrence of the problems in question, but also determine the initiation of activities to effect change. Forming a clear picture on the nature of the community problems requires the social worker to organize and orientates the mental activity towards useful ideas, which provides opportunities for a

deeper interpretation of the phenomena studied and formulation of suggestions about their nature based on conclusions, generalizations, tendencies etc. The conceptual framework in place contributes to the overall understanding of community issues and is one of the significant factors contributing to their successful management. The above determines our research interest in regards to the conceptualisation of the social problems of the community, given that the community social work in theoretical and practical terms is one of the under-developed and researched areas in the field of social work in Bulgaria.

Conceptualisation of the social problems of the community

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The formation of a clear picture on the nature of the community social problems on the basis of their in-depth analysis contributes to the definition of their value and power foundation and the impact of the culture on their generation, as well as for the drawing of conclusions, summaries of dynamics and trends and the achievement of a comprehensive understanding of the nature and dynamics of their course as social phenomenon. In the outlined context, the conceptualisation of the community social problems represents as one of the significant and relevant to their solving issues in the macro practice of the social work.

The communities, as social systems, individually or assisted by professionals, determine which of the social problems are significantly affecting their functioning, affect negatively the lives and well-being of their members and require action to be taken in order to overcome them. In this respect, the social worker's clear vision of the community issues is a prerequisite for: selecting appropriate intervention; jointly designing solutions in order to solve existing problems; forming of action groups and coalitions; taking into account the impact of power imbalances, stereotypes and prejudices; taking into account the social and cultural context and the potential and ability of community members to come together and work together to achieve social change and development. The presented aspects of understanding address the following basic questions, which bring clarity to the understanding of the social problems of the community: a way of identifying the social problems of the community; the importance of the community social problems and experience in dealing with other problems; potential, abilities and resources of the community to manage and solve the social problems. Such an approach requires exploration of a number of variables and interrelated factors and realities, formation of a clear framework and concept of the social problems and related to them interventions. Essential to the success of the process in question, as part of the community social work, is the active involvement of the community members in the process.

The understanding of how problems are present in the social context of people and the community is one of the factors contributing to the clarity of them. If the social worker merely points out that a community is confronted with problems related to domestic violence and separation of parents, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of access to health, social and educational services, care for the elderly, equal opportunities in the field employment, access to municipal housing, etc., he would not be convincing enough if he did not take seriously into account the social, economic and cultural context of that community. The problems addressed can take different forms and specific dimensions in terms of origin and development and damage to the community

and between communities, due to certain cultural differences [10].

Some researchers have identified as common a range of social problems related to: economic disadvantage, disabilities, mental illness, anti-social acts and crime, violence, lack of services for people with special needs, absence or limited resource programs with social and health focus and more [8]. According to them, the above mentioned social problems can be seen as widely spread, disadvantaging individuals and groups in communities and requiring the unification of efforts, active and competent leadership, community commitment and appropriate professional intervention to achieve social change. In this regard, researchers note that being convinced of a problem as a serious threat to one community or the entire society motivates and guides their members towards taking timely actions to address it and deal with it [8].

Achieving an understanding of a client's social problem requires the social worker to consider his or her point of view and judgment, without them being defining and dominating. The formation of a professional position implies competent analysis and evaluation of the problem, and the client's perceptions are not ignored but are appropriately present in the social worker intervention strategy [9]. In the context of this perspective, it may be argued that individuals and groups in the community affected by problems of a certain kind may be useful with their experience and positions to better understand their nature. The analysis in the outlined direction brings out one of the challenges in the work of the contemporary social worker, concerning, on the one hand, the non-imposition of a position and the displacement of the professional judgment of the specialist from another subject, and, on the other, the training of the social worker from the experience of the client and his active involvement in clarifying the nature and specificity of the problems and factors for their occurrence. In the two aspects presented, we must bear in mind that each position and judgment, regardless of which one is made, contains its limitations and requires the provision of more information and in-depth analysis. The client's confidence that they know the problem well, seeing it and encountering it on a daily basis does not in all cases correspond to the professional view and analysis of the social worker and does not always build up the professional reality of the circumstances, risk factors and adequate intervention. It should be noted that this does not in any way mean to deprivation of power the client or falsely to be taken into account his/her point of view to the professional position and judgment of the social worker.

Identifying the social problems of the community is an important conceptual and technological moment of the community social work. An essential factor for the social worker to perform informed and competent intervention into the

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community is the understanding of how he can define problems and use tools and approaches for analysis to clarify their nature and the potential solutions.

Analytically, the elements of the social problems can be addressed through the following scheme: circumstances, conditions or occurrences that represent a problem; subjects for whom these circumstances, conditions or occurrences create difficulties in social functioning and cause problems; what are the reasons for them to cause problems; potential opportunities for intervention and provision of community support.

Defining the social problems of the community requires focusing of the social work on the constructive and the positive, which is in favour of achieving change in the client and increasing his or her well-being. In the outlined context, we could broadly define the social problems of the community as a mismatch between the current situation and what is possible or need to be achieved through change, all of it being in interest of developing a community with good social functioning. The point of view presented here makes it possible to highlight the following assumptions about the community social problems:

- for the majority of social problems, it is possible to reach an appropriate solution, which can be in the form of a full or partial solution and to some extent improve the situation. At the heart of the efforts of the community and its members must be the optimistic view that change can be achieved, but it can be the result of good organization and purposeful action;

- despite the difficulties created by the social problems, they can contribute to the achievement of good results. In situations where problems are raised by the community and its members result in them becoming more active and motivated to seek opportunities for social change;

- the social problems are a challenge for the community and its members and require the maximum mobilization and use of the best of their potential and abilities. Working to deal with them contributes to making sense of people's lives and engaging them in activities that are beneficial to the community and society leads to social change and development;

- solving the social problems in the community is a joint process based not only on constructive and positive interaction and teamwork, but also on mastering certain skills – the ability to analyse precisely and critically a given problem and the ability to choose the most appropriate solution based on this analysis.

The identifying of the community social problems requires compliance with the following basic principles:

- defining the problem in terms of needs, not a given solution. Defining a social problem from the perspective of a possible solution is a prerequisite for disregarding alternative options, which in the case of

dynamic and changing conditions and emerging needs could turn out to be more effective;

- the problem must be defined as affecting the whole community and requiring activity and responsibility in dealing with it. This involves analysing how it affects all members, motivates, and brings them together to find the right solution. Pre-occupying a position that seeks someone to blame for the problem may lead to a mistake and could possible disconnect and demotivate the members of the community;

- the definition of a social problem must be clear and comprehensible to all subjects involved in solving it. It should provide feedback regarding the understanding and acceptance of the participants;

- the key point in the definition of a problem must be presented in clear, accessible and understandable terminology;

- the definition of a problem must provide an opportunity for supplementing, modification, or formulation of a new definition that appears to be more responsive to the needs of the community and its members.

Framework for analysing and evaluating the social problems of the community

In the process of identifying the community social problems, researchers propose a framework that can be used for the variety of them [11]. In structural terms, the framework presented by the authors consists of the following components for analysis and evaluation:

- normativity. One of the rules for identifying a problem is to identify it as non-compliance and deviation from the established standards or norms. The norm may be statistical and the deviation quantitative, for example, deviations from the minimum standard of living or poverty index. It may be possible to refer to some quality parameters – for example the quality of life, formation of household income, employment security, income security, etc. If the community plans to take specific actions and wants to succeed through them, a wider range of norms or standards should fall within the scope of its attention and analysis. On order to succeed the community members and groups must overcome any differences in their views on the accepted norms or standards and achieve unity;

- ideology and value configurations. The ideology is associated with a system of values and beliefs that, in their entirety, form perceptions about the society and its processes and occurrences. The term “ideology” refers to the feeling of community, norms of acceptable behaviour in the community and the society, a sense of belonging to the community and mutual commitments, etc. The ideology in the communities is characterized by a unifying function. The community values range in the continuum from

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tolerance to disapproval and sanctioning on certain topics, for example, violence, sex, alcohol and drug use and more. Whether and to what extent these occurrences will be regarded as deviation from the norm and create a problem depends on the perceptions determined by the ideology. In this context, the matter about the rights of a child and the cultural and educational measures, including physical and other punishments, have been debated in some communities. Similar are the issues of the physical violence and sexual abuse of children and women, the marriage with children and childbirth of children and others. The generally accepted perceptions in the community, determined by its values and ideology, facilitate the clear and public definition of the problems;

- causal social relationships. Most of the problems that communities face are based on social factors and cause and effect relationships. However, this does not mean that in this process, the influence and the intersection of biological, mental, natural and other factors are not considered and that is acted in one way only. In the modern society, the conflict between natural, biological, technological and social factors is relevant. The existence of causal social relationships does not mean that the problems are extremely social, on the contrary, today their complex nature is becoming more prominent;

- scope. The scope refers to the social dimensions of the problems, the number of people affected and the extent of their harmful effects. It is necessary to be taken into account the relationship between these components – social significance, number of people affected by the problem and degree of vulnerability of the community members. However, one should not go to extremes, as people from a particular group representing a small part of the community may experience the profound impact of a serious social problem or a set of problems that require the community to become active and involved in solving them;

- social costs (social price). Social costs are associated with the assumption that the non-engagement to solve problems can have an economic, physical, personal, interpersonal or cultural price. Taken together, they are viewed as a social price. This cost may be substantial, it may require additional costs of valuable resources, depending on whether problems are prevented or successfully solved at an early or later stage of their occurrence. The social price is not perceived and does not affect everyone in the same way. An important task in the community social work is to analyse and evaluate in the following aspects: subjects that bear the social costs; how social costs are perceived by the community members and the community itself; how the distribution of the social costs are perceived by the members of the community and by the community itself; access to the use of resources for social costs. Obstacles to the

provision of resources for social costs have the potential to create serious difficulties. An example of this can be given by the increase in the poverty line, the impoverished population and the deterioration of the mental health of people. Along with high levels of insecurity, limited prospects for individual development due to socio-economic constraints, poverty is an essential factor that is directly related to the quality of life, well-being and mental health. There is a tendency that the poorest in the society suffer more from mental health problems. In this context, the poverty line is an important tool for the making of a social policy, which in the context of determining the social costs of the community social work is considered as an important factor;

- restoration possibilities. The perceptions of the community members about the causes of a given problem and the potential for coping with a situation of difficulty, which was a result from its impact, are important factors for restoration. However, not all of these positions of the community are sufficient in all cases, and they do not always have the resources they need for a change. It is necessary the development of a plan with actions included in it to deal with the problem and to be accepted by the various groups in the community. The plan may change depending on the dynamics of needs and the development of the problem. In this regard, the synthesis of perceptions of causes, the availability of appropriate internal and external resources, the planning and belief in restoration opportunities are important levers to achieve the desired change.

The presented framework for analysing and evaluating the social problems of the communities should not be seen as a template and a set of stereotyped actions. It represent a tool for better gaining of an understanding of the essence, the causes of the occurrence and their scope, as well as the factors that determine their resolution in an effective way and the possibilities to restore and bring change in the best interests of the communities and their members [13]. The framework allows for in-depth analysis and evaluation in specific areas, careful and reasoned planning of the necessary actions and forecasting the results.

Other frameworks have been developed to identify community problems, but in general they are closer to the model presented above [16].

Solving of the community social problems

The identifying and solving of social problems in the community settings is about empowering their members and getting them actively involved. The analysis of researchers' views and constructed models for solving a problem as a collaborative and community-based process enables the following major components to be summarized [1; 2; 3; 4; 6; 7; 15]:

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- clarifying the nature of the problem. It involves certain steps consisting in: gathering initial information from the community members through specific methods (focus groups, brainstorming, surveys, interviews, etc.), by paying attention to the views of all participants; establishment of basic information that reveals the causes of the problem and the people affected by it; gathering detailed information about the problem by: identifying facts, formulating conclusions, making assumptions, presenting opinions. The synthesis of the information gathered in the few steps presented allows for a better understanding of the position of the community and its members, eliminates some misconceptions and builds an appropriate information campaign and strategy for solving the problem;

- defining the problem. The formed volume of information provides an opportunity to define the problem appropriately. The success of this process is determined by the compliance to two basic principles: defining the problem from the standpoint of the existing needs, rather than those of preliminary solutions that may prove unachievable; defining the problem as having a negative impact on the whole community and all its members, without first identifying the possible subjects and institutions that, through their actions or inactions, contributed to its occurrence. Defining the problem requires the given definition to be clear and comprehensible to all and to allow the main moments to be included in the standpoint about it;

- making a decision in order to deal with the problem. The activities carried out so far require a critical look at the problem and determining the appropriate path to solve it. Deciding how to deal with a problem must be based on an informed choice, and in this respect the following factors are essential: the importance of the problem and the possibilities for solving it; possible negative consequences of its resolution, which should not dominate the positive results; arranging the constituent parts of the problem or problems by the degree of urgency and priority to be resolved;

- analysing the problem. After gathering the necessary information about the problem and defining it, an in-depth analysis is carried out, allowing to identify the details and to obtain a good understanding of the nature, the causes of its occurrence and its characteristic dynamics. In this regard, it is appropriate to use techniques and methods that allow members of the community to present their views on: the causes of the problem, the time of its occurrence and the moment of its deepening, the individuals, families and groups affected by it, the severity of the problem and the extent of its impact on the social functioning, life and well-being of the community and its members. The analysis of the problem concludes with a summary. Agreeing on the views outlined above is an important prerequisite for joining forces

of all community members and taking effective actions to bring about the desired change.

Focusing the professional attention of the social workers not only on specific community issues, but also on broader-scale of social problems, according to researchers, is an essential element of their work [5]. Their view in this regard is that, as professionals, they should use more socially integrated strategies to make demands and make proposals for changes in the social policy, for improving the quality of life and well-being of people.

When making requests to institutions or authorities, the representatives of the community and social workers need to use certain techniques that make substantiated arguments, improve perceptions and increase the sensitivity of society to existing social problems:

- linking the campaign on bringing out and promoting the social problem with different children and adults cases, which have generated a strong social response and caused social and legal changes (for example, violence in different types against people of different racial or ethnic origin, or with different sexual orientation and encroachments on their lives, human trafficking, etc.);

- typifying, this is expressed in presenting important and characteristic social problems that are beneficial for people. It can also be expressed in the detection of shortcomings and gaps in the legislation of previous governing bodies. Those shortcomings and gaps explain the existence of certain problems and a position is set out for implementation of regulatory changes in order to achieve certain improvements. In typifying, both parties – the requesting and the institutions and authorities responsible for its implementation – are presented in good light;

- presenting demonstrative and impactful examples of social problems of life and social work practices, enables people who do not have the experience to understand and gain a sense of their impact (for example, issues related to racial or ethnic profiling, discrimination against racial or ethnic basis, drastic neglect of fundamental social values and human rights, etc.) [14].

The last two techniques suggest the use of advocacy in order to be dealt with the given problem.

The culture is one of the factors that influence the conceptualization of the problems, their perception and the implementation of strategies for solving them. In this respect, the social workers are required to possess the necessary cultural competence to enable them to be effective in supporting their clients. Examination on the matter of culture in a given specific context implies a certain range of its aspects, referring to race and ethnicity, class, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc. [12; 17]. Quite a few communities are heterogeneous in the above aspects, and cultural sensitivity and culturally competent clients and professionals are essential to

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conceptualizing and solving social problems. Their members interact and participate in more than one cultural context on a daily basis, which implies the existence of a “shared” nature and importance of the social problems. This requires social workers who are effectively interacting and supportive to use an approach to gain a deeper understanding of the people's thinking from a particular culture, their perceptions of the world and its categorization, norms and models of behaviour, important for them things, their understanding and explanations about phenomena and processes in the world (emic approach). According to researchers, this approach allows them to gain a better understanding of the clients from another culture, factors from the external environment, generating problems, as well as their community and cultural-specific values and attitudes [12]. At the same time, they note that in order to prevent objectivity, it is necessary to strike a balance between the two main activity components in the approach under consideration: the analysis of the external environment, which allows us to highlight similarities and differences and to compare or find

points of contact in the whole system; actual subjective experience.

Conclusion

Identifying the social problems of communities and gaining an understanding of the ways in which they are present to their members' social and cultural context and life is an important conceptual and technological component of the community social work. It contributes to the forming of a professionally justified position of the social worker based on competent analysis and evaluation of the problem, while at the same time taking into account and integrating the views and position of the community and its members in an appropriate manner. In the context outlined, the definition of problems and the use of analysis and evaluation tools and approaches to clarify their nature, character and possibilities to deal with them effectively is an essential factor in both informed and competent provision of intervention to bring about change in the best interest of the community and its empowerment and development.

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