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KNOWLEDGE AND TREATMENT SKILLS IN THE FIELD OF PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELLING

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Abstract:

The article presents the basic knowledge and treatment skills in the field of psychosocial counselling. It includes knowledge, skills, personal characteristics, and the ethics of a professional worker, the method of psychosocial approach with and individual and a group, as well as a collective social work. The basic definition of the knowledge and treatment skills in the article is presented by the concept of a working relationship in a social world and by the concepts of modern social work – power perspective, participation ethics, treatment skills, and treatment of the present time. The article also presents the key definitions of social work in the counselling and power processes. The establishing of social-working relationship includes the use of the language, the directing of the dialogue and other methods of postmodern social work.

Key words: knowledge and treatment skills, psychosocial counselling, methods of psychosocial work, work relationship, concepts of modern social work

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Introduction

In this article, we will deal with the treatment of knowledge and treatment skills in the field of psychosocial counselling by relying on the inclusion of necessary social work skills and basic sciences from the field of counselling, as well as by supporting patients in the process of solving their psychosocial problems.

Skidmore defines social work as an art, a science, and a profession oriented towards helping people with solving their personal, group and collective problems. He also exposes the help for keeping satisfying personal, group and collective relationships (Skidmore, 1991, p. 8).

In her definition, Čačinovič Vogrinčič exposes the specificity of social work and defines the treatment methods by defining the counselling

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(support, assistance) as a basic subject of social work. She presents social work as “an original working project of collaboration, that we create based on understanding, consultation and forming collective solutions, so the people who share the problem would share also the solution” (Čačinovič Vogrinčič 2006: 27).

The IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) defines that the profession of social work facilitates social changes, development, social connection, strengthening of power/equality and liberation of people. The principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respecting the differences have a central value in social work (<http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>).

In the context of defining social work with IASSW and ISFW, Mesec (2009) suggests a definition that would define social work more specifically:

“Social work is a line of profession whose task is to help concrete persons, individuals, groups and communities to solve socially problematic situations and social inclusions in order to satisfy their basic needs, in a way that is suitable for a certain culture in which they live and for a normal quality of life. While taking charge of this task, the profession respects the users’ autonomy, it bases itself upon their sources of self-help and solidarity and harmonizes their needs with the needs of their environment.

At the same time, social work is also a science of that professional activity, of a non-formal form of help, solidarity and circumstances in which they took place. As a professional field and a line of profession, social work is directed by values of the universal ethos.”

As a practical activity, social work is defined by numerous authors, among which we should expose Jordan (1990, p.1), who believes that the personal qualities of a social worker are almost equally important as their knowledge. He defines social work as a line of profession which operates out of the solid institutional spaces: among people, it uses their language and an everyday kind of logic. According to Jordan (1987), in this sense, social work is space-diffusional and necessary-reflexive.

Flaker (2012, p. 62–63) also defines social work as a practical activity, an action, a function, and a production of human activities, settlements, changes. He believes that social work introduces changes and helps, facilitates transitions through them while adapting to them. Social work is an innovation; it creates something new and helps to confront with it.

Flaker (2012, p. 13, 118–122) comprehends social work as a practical activity, furthermore, he talks about a direct social work, about taking immediate responsibility for direct behaviours and collective action. A direct social work rejects the roles of mediators, it replaces mediation with intervention that actively contests all forms of constraints, devaluation, and stigmatization of people (ibid, p. 121–122).

Modern social work takes into account the user's equality and non-repetition to develop in the counselling process "the creation of an equal partnership and collaboration with the users, an obligation to the user's wellbeing, reflexivity and criticalness, familiarity with one's own values, prejudices, skills and limitations, the precision to negotiate a mandate, not doubting a speaker's words, a constant dialogue between the doctrine and experiences, a confrontation of concepts and practical work, a clear communication of one's own distress" (Flaker, 2003: 246).

Psychosocial counselling is based on pragmatic ordinance, on the ethnography of what people do and what is possible to do with them during the counselling process.

Knowledge, skills, personal characteristics, and the professional worker's ethic in the field of psychosocial counselling

Professional knowledge is an important part of psychosocial work. The common knowledge base, needed by the experts in order to implement psychosocial counselling, unites theory and researches about the individual, family, a small group, about the organisation and group behaviour and development, the theory and researches about social problems, such as neglecting children, child, spouses and old people abuse, poverty, discrimination, and violence, the theory and researches for understanding and invention in the field of health, mental health, and substance abuse, the theory and researches for understanding various groups and cultures, understanding the differential uses of the theory and the principles of social work with high-risk groups, knowledge for introducing, starting, collecting data, arranging, intervening, evaluating, and concluding processes in the practical part of social work, knowledge regarding the processes that are connected to a clear and an accurate communication, knowledge about medical methodology and research procedures, and knowledge about relevant social politics, that are important for potential users as well as for understanding the path of their acceptance and influence on them (The process of professionalization of social work).

A skill is a successful use of knowledge, talents, personality, and sources. The skills of a professional worker include a successful communication, the ability to recognize problems, and the capacity to evaluate the user's ability to work, to connect the needs with the sources, to acquire the sources, and to change social cultures.

The key skills that a psychosocial worker needs for fulfilling their professional role are the ability to listen to others with understanding and intention, the ability to select information and collect relevant data for preparing a life history, statement and report, the ability to form and maintain a professional relationship of counselling and to use our own person in this relationship, the ability to observe and interpret a verbal and nonverbal behaviour and use the personality theory and diagnostic methods, the ability to engage users to try to solve their problems and gain confidence, the ability to treat sensitive emotional questions in a non-threatening and supportive way, the ability to search for new innovative solutions for the user's needs, to decide about the need to form a therapeutic relationship and the way to do it, to interpret the statement of the researches and specialized literature, to intervene in the mediation and negotiation among partners in conflict, the ability to assure a service connected to other organizations, to interpret or communicate social needs to the public or to legislative bodies, in order to find adequate sources (ibid).

The basic quality of an expert, in order to acquire the skills needed for a successful execution of professional work, is first and foremost empathy, which is the ability to accept, understand, experience, and respond to an emotional state and to other people's thoughts. It is a process of experiencing with another person. It is a wilful and intentional connection with others in their subjective experience. It helps the expert gain a certain respect and sensitivity towards people with whom they work. The empathic connection enables a better solution. The next quality is respect, which represents a relationship without control, a warm and loving acceptance of the other person, the expressing of an unconditional and positive acceptance. The expert has to consider every individual as a unique being that deserves respect. What we need is the authenticity of the expert. An authentic person behaves naturally, truly, and openly towards other people and is in its core human above everything else. It is expected from an expert to understand values, ethics, responsibilities, and to have professional knowledge, and a responsible assertiveness (Cournoyer, 2010).

Treatment skills

Modern American authors classify the methods of social work on a micro, middle, and macro level: the micro level includes social work with a single case (Social Casework) and the conducting of the case (Case Management), the middle level includes group work, group therapy, and family therapy. The macro level includes community organization and administration (Milošević Arnold, Poštrak, 2003, p. 101).

Barker defines the social work method with individual cases as an “orientation, value system, and type of practical work of professional social workers, where the psychosocial, behavioural and systematic concepts are transmitted through treatment skills for individuals and families in order to help them solve their personal, interpersonal, socio-economic and ecologic problems with a direct (‘face to face’) relationship...” (Barker, 1995 in Milošević Arnold, Poštrak, 2003 p. 103).

Konopka defines social work in a group as a method of social work in which the counselling is directed towards the individual within the group. He also believes that the group work showed very early that there is no dichotomy between the individual and the group and that this collaboration actually helps individuals develop their highest potentials and the sense of their own value (Konopka, 1961 in Milošević Arnold, Poštrak, 2003, p. 106).

Toseland and Rivas define group counselling as an activity with small therapeutic and work groups, oriented towards the satisfaction of social and emotional needs and completion of tasks. They also define the triple focus of social work: the individual in the group, the group as a whole, and the environment in which the group acts (Toseland and Rivas, 2009, p. 12). Among the purposes of group counselling they place socialization, social action, problem solving, developing social values, prevention, rehabilitation, etc. (ibid, p. 19–20) Among the examples of support and help groups they indicate groups for personal growth, socialization groups, self-help groups, therapeutic, educational and support groups (ibid, p. 20–19).

Furthermore, the authors define the advantages and the imperfections of group support and counselling and consider presenting and receiving feedbacks, mutual help, empathy from multiple angles, normalization, testing reality, practicing new behaviours, sources, solidarity, social support, approval, and socialization as advantages. Furthermore, they define some imperfections of group support and counselling, especially breaking trust, stimulating conformity and the members’ dependence, the need to adapt, etc. (ibid, p. 17).

Brager and Specht define social work as a method that individuals, groups or organizations use to include themselves in planned actions with which they influence social problems (Brager and Specht, 1973 in Skidmore et al., 1991, p. 96).

The group approach itself is a strategy for forming the community while dealing with everyday situations where the “community is a partner in the project and not the object of the work”, where situation of individuals and groups in the community and also their view on the “problematic” situation has to be clearly defined (Grebenc et. al., 2010, p. 67, 86).

The concepts of social work in a working relationship

The treatment skills are a concept that was enforced in the Slovenian social work and is based on the concept of “actionable knowledge” of the Israeli professor Ion Rosenfeld (1993). The concept presents the particularity of the knowledge that developed within social work and its treatment. It is about knowledge that we can change into action. A professional worker is responsible for establishing and maintaining a working relationship and the context of social-working dialogue in order to deliver their professional knowledge – the concepts that define the collaboration with users and enable the “translation” into personal language and back into professional language in order to create new stories while researching and co-finding solutions (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2005 et al., p. 14–15).

Čačinovič Vogrinčič defines the working relationship as a relationship between the expert and the users – or the participants in the problem – in the process of finding solutions for complex social problems (ibid).

In a working relationship, social work is based on four concepts of modern social work: the power perspective (Saleeby 1997), the participation ethics (Hoffman 1994), the treatment skills (Rosenfeld 1993) and the treatment with the present or the concept of co-presence (Andersen 1994).

The practice of power perspective is based on the fact that the counsellor’s behaviour is based on helping to uncover, research the client’s power and sources as well as on helping them obtain their goals, realise their dreams, and break the chains of obstacles and misfortune. The power perspective demands that the expert should think about the approach and the relationship towards the users. It is necessary to redirect the user’s relationship and understanding from problems to possibilities, capacities (Saleeby, 2009).

Čačinovič Vogrinčič with her co-workers (2005) stresses the meaning of a respectful search for the user's sources and the power from their contribution. The behaviour that derives from the perspective of power tells us that we are searching for desired complications, hope, support in a community, the user's good experiences from the past, etc. (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2005 et al., p. 13–14).

The author presents the power lexicon with the basic concepts and principles: empowerment – supporting the users so they can discover and widen the sources and tools within themselves and around them, membership – respecting a person's needs because they are a responsible and respected member of the community, resilience – the concept does not diminish the weight of past wounds, it only stresses the individual's power to recover, so that strikes and powerlessness do not drive them into an inevitable pathology, healing and wholeness – it means that the person has the power to heal, dialogue and collaboration – co-creating a new story in a person's life with understanding and communication, suspension of disbelief – it means that we are renouncing the fact that we do not believe the users' messages and words (ibid).

The participation ethics means that all the participants of the original counselling project are co-participants, co-creators. No one has the last word and no one needs it, the group work is a discussion that follows an agreement. By that the expert steps away from the role of the person who has the solutions, the answers for the users and instead co-creates and looks for new solutions with the users. The participation ethics is the core value of social thoughts (Hoffman, 1994 in Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al., 2005).

As for the treatment skills, it means that a professional worker has also the knowledge for treating. The treatment of the present presents the concept of co-presence. We stay with the user in the present, we listen carefully, we are there to help, we are not just passive listeners, but we contribute to the formation of the story.

Conclusion

Skills are the base of social work and it is above all the skills that qualify an expert for implementing psychosocial help. Flaker classifies among the skills of social work various skills, such as skills to discuss, to listen, psychotherapeutic skills, skills to evaluate, interactive work, group work, planning skills, skills to carry out projects, cultural work, skills to manage

the risks, to dismiss and diminish damage, to strengthen the power, to defend oneself, to work in a group, on the street and among people, to organize services, documentation, writing and reporting skills, skills of a scientific, evaluation and personal practical research of the practice, skills to manage, to provide the necessary means (Flaker, 2003, p. 22–23).

The competences of a professional worker in the field of psychosocial counselling also include the qualities of a professional worker, along with professional knowledge needed for their concrete work, including knowledge about the individual, the family, common knowledge and development, and knowledge about discrimination and violence, understanding of various groups and cultures, knowledge about relevant social politics, understanding in the sphere of health, mental health and substance abuse, knowledge about processes connected to communication, etc. (Milošević Arnold and Poštrak, 2003, p. 123–127). Among the qualities of a social worker, we also classify their personal characteristics and ethics. Milošević and Poštrak expose that for the user, in practice, the social worker's personal qualities are as important as their methods and their technics (*ibid*). Regarding the counsellor's personal qualities, Mrammer warns that in order to successfully work with others, everyone has to know themselves. The expert's most important characteristics in the relationship with the user are self-consciousness and awareness of own values, perception of cultural experiences, ability to analyse their own feelings, capacity to influence and be a role model to others, altruism and ability to express the feeling of ethics and responsibility (Brammer, 1993 in Milošević Arnold and Poštrak, 2003).

The lack of care for oneself as a counsellor, when counsellors demand too much from themselves and avoid situations that make them feel powerless as well as the fact that they feel they need to change their client are the basic symptoms of the help syndrome, presented by Bouwkamp and Vries (2002, p. 85–86). Expert workers from the field of psychosocial counselling often show this kind of symptoms.

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