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Connecting theory and practice



Photo by Jiri Pasz

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## Editorial

### Social Work: Science, Practice and Profession



In his editorial of this journal's Special English Issue from 2011, Libor Musil showed deep concerns about "both the lack of attention to the 'methods and processes' of help through social work" and "inadequate focus on 'clients' of Czech and Slovak social work" in general. According to him social workers should "know the difficulties which their clients experience" and be able to use adequate "knowledge, methods and techniques to deal with all problems that they encounter" (p.2).

Therefore - as editor of the Special English Issue 2014 - I'm very pleased to be able to present articles to the national and international social work community, which cover the whole range of perspectives within social work and thus give readers the opportunity to choose between articles according to their special interests and needs. Social work as science, practice and

profession is manifold, and our contributors within this issue are able to demonstrate that despite their very specialized perspectives, they all belong to the huge community of social work theory and practice. Consequently it's important that readers of these texts try to identify the different starting points and respective argumentations.

We, as the community of both scientists and practitioners in social work, should always be aware of the fact that social work is not one-dimensional, is not a harmonic unity, but - because it is scientifically based - accepts concurrent paradigms and argumentations. So - only if we are able to identify the different perspectives and interests, a controversial debate about the possibilities and restrictions of each argumentation will be possible. And this debate could help us to fulfil our mission and to come closer towards a critical, reflective and knowledge based practice.

So let me shortly characterize the different articles:

In a **methodologically directed article** "Reading social work" the English author Malcom Payne reminds us about the importance of reading historical and contemporary theoretical and descriptive texts for a better understanding of social work contexts. As especially students and practitioners increasingly need to perceive texts in a very quick and superficial way, (e.g. via the internet, through Wikipedia, etc.), it is important to remind them that "homiletics provides a technology for interpretation of both surface and hidden events and texts".

Three **client-oriented articles** from Magda Frišaufová on "Research Accounts of Female Drug Use and their Implications for Social Work", from Kateřina Glumbíková on "The Situation of Single Grandmothers with a Child



in Substitute Family Care in Asylum Houses in the Moravian-Silesian Region” and from Soňa Lovašová on “Client Violence in Social Work Practice: Conflict Styles of Victims” give us a very deep and intensive insight into the life and problem situations of selected social work clients. At the same time they remind us that social worker should have an in depth understanding of their clients’ situation . Moreover the willingness to learn from clients seems to be one of the major tasks of each social worker who feels committed “to act with and not upon people” (Paolo Freire).

With a very much **practice-oriented article** on “The participatory approach in low-threshold centres for children and youth” Anna Krchňavá shows that important social work values, as e.g. participation, co-partnership, shared decision-making, etc. should - if we want them to be successful - be strengthened very early in life. So social workers should learn the methods we can use to include our clients into decision making from the beginning. No matter how the life situation of clients might be influenced or restricted, the task of a social worker is always to help them to fully achieve integration and personal, social and legal acceptance.

The importance and use of the **reference discipline of social policy** for social work is shown by the article from Aneta Hašková and Tomáš Waloszek on “Substitute Family Care in the Context of Social Policy of the Czech Republic”. Social work procedures and methods are strongly influenced by national legal frameworks and regional cultures. Even if social workers have to respect and refer to these different frameworks, they can learn more about the different impacts of policies by starting to compare these influences with the situation in other countries.

Especially with the growing influence of right wing parties across Europe on services for

immigrants and the specific role of social work herein should receive more attention even in countries with a smaller immigrant population. Roman Baláž and Daniel Topinka tell us on the “Analysis of the Regional Distribution of Social Services for Immigrants” within **their sociologically oriented analysis** that the extent of social work institutions and organisations is highly depending on a public dialogue which decides if politicians and citizens can or cannot see a specific need.

Finally, it is the article of Kirstin Bromberg about “Becoming a Professional. Improving Social Action through Letter Writing in Social Work Education”, which reminds teachers and lecturers in social work that in order to improve **social work education and training** and to help students to go in to a deeper reflexion it is not sufficient to only talk about and verbally discuss social work practice. Students should very early learn to express their arguments and conclusions by the possibility of letter writing. More than oral conversations, this method gives us the opportunity of “slow thinking” and thus helps us to avoid “cognitive illusion” as well as “mental laziness” or “self-exhaustion” (D. Kahnemann).

I am persuaded that this Special Issue 2015 holds an interesting selection of articles for national and international scientists and practitioners, showing the broad range of social work practice and social work science. I hope that you, as the reader, gain new insight, information and questions - leading to further discussion and argumentation for a vivid social work science, practice and profession.

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# Reading Social Work

Malcolm Payne

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## Abstract

This paper proposes the value of conceptualising as 'reading' social work interpersonal actions and written documents, since 'reading' as developed in cultural and media studies, literary criticisms and homiletics provides a technology for interpretation of both surface and hidden events and texts, potentially providing opportunities for empirical analysis of alternative understandings of social work. Media of communication, representation, structure, audiences and authors and politics of interaction may all be considered, and exploring source and structural awareness in readers, concept recognition, difference awareness and link awareness together with concern for phonology, semantics, grammar and pragmatics provide a technology for analysis. Discussion of a social work record, a higher education assessment in social work and paragraphs in two social work academic texts exemplify some of the possibilities.

## Keywords

assessment, communication, discourse, documentation, reading, representation, research, social work



## Introduction

Why should we discuss reading social work? What does it involve? Reading is only one conceptualisation of ways of engaging with discourses about social work, but I want to argue that it offers a rich analogy. This is because it allows us to draw on many different forms of reading as metaphors for ways of exploring our discourses. It also permits us to draw on expertise in academies and professions concerned both with hermeneutics, that is, the interpretation of literature and spiritual texts and also with teaching people how to read. Such academic and professional discourses in cultural studies, literacy education and literary studies and homilectics (the study of rhetoric in religious interpretation) have examined in detail physical, psychological and social responses to complex discourses and can enrich our understanding of reading social work.

I argue, therefore, that exploring 'reading' social work, as an occupational group or activity which is based on human communication and therefore human interpretation, provides evidence of the complexities of various understandings of that group or activity, which should in turn inform the design and execution of research and scholarship about them, and assist practitioners of the activity to carry it out.

To exemplify issues about reading social work, I discuss in this paper 'texts' within social work, and discuss some conclusions about alternative interpretations of reading social work as a form of research and scholarship and their implications for social work as a practice, as a profession and as a social phenomenon.

## What is reading?

Reading may seem an uncomplicated task; we learn to read in childhood, and it becomes such a common activity for educated adults as to seem unremarkable. Yet children sometimes struggle to acquire the ability '...to inspect and silently interpret or say aloud (letters, words, sentences, etc.) by passing the eyes or fingers over written, printed engraved or embossed characters' (Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 2477). The difficulty for adults of learning to read another language, or to read music or numerical data, reminds us throughout life of the complexity of the task.

When we meet people with reading difficulties such as dyslexia or who have failed to pick up the skill, we can see that lacking the ability to read inhibits personal development in education and work. Other uses of the term 'reading' refer to the ability to make sense of a written text, to understand a language sufficiently to interpret words written and spoken in it, and to interpret symbols and notation of the language. Further analogies refer to the ability to 'read off' the numbers in a measuring device and make sense of them (for example when we are driving to see if we are over-extending the capacity of a car's engine, or exceeding a speed limit), or to read a graph (interpreting graphical information). We also talk about being able to 'read' a situation (for example, by noticing and interpreting a variety of signals in a human interaction so that we may understand partially or fully hidden aspects of it, such as motivation, power relations and interests).

In philosophy, hermeneutics has been developed as a set of rules for the interpretation of texts, but has been developed (for example by Gadamer; Grondin, 2007), to explore complexities in the relationships between the self of the reader and the truth and the consequences for a reader of their interpretations of and dialogue with texts. Thus, we can see reading as a constant interaction or dialogue between participants in a situation about their readings and attempts to arrive at an understanding of the structures and truths that may be identified in texts. For the social worker reading situations and texts assists them in identifying alternative structures and interpretations that are present in a situation of text.

It is these extended understandings of the concepts of reading, which focus on interpretation of complex data, or of partially or wholly hidden aspects of materials and social interactions that we view. Issues may include:

- The media of communication, such as interpersonal, written, printed, published, audio, video and computer
- Representation, such as embodiment, stereotype, image, symbols, signs, variaora (different representations of the same material), demonstration or persuasion
- Structure, including sequence, flow, narrative, analysis



- Audiences as constraining or freeing, as coherent or fragmented
- Politics, created through group, intergroup and intragroup interaction, socio-economic divisions, ethnicities, gender, age, sexual orientation (Fish, 1980; Thornham, Bassett, Marris, 2009).

Reading always contains two elements: something that is read, and what is produced in the readers of it. Cultural and media studies use a neutral term for materials that are read, 'texts'. Originally, a text was a sacred writing, such as a passage from the Christian Bible. Later, 'text' referred to any written, printed writing (for example, a book) or transmitted passage (for example, a 'text message' as opposed to a telephone call). In cultural studies, texts are anything made up of connected signs, for example, a book, an interaction between people or a related series of actions such as a social work interview. Readers are the audience for a text. Audiences do more than perceiving texts, they learn the activity of reading, which enables them to interpret or make sense of the signs within a text. Signs, in semiotics (the study of signs) are aspects of texts that influence the interpretation that readers make. Signifiers are those aspects of a sign from which meaning is derived, and the signified are aspects of a sign that represent meanings. The meanings that are read are affected by the reader's referents, the factors in the cultures that affect a reader's interpretations of signs (Branston, Stafford, 2010: 11–13; Copley, 2010: 32–5, 305). In setting out this sequence of explanations of terms in culture, media and semiotic studies, I am selecting and simplifying a complex series of debates about terminology for my purpose in considering reading social work. Most reading is intertextual: we observe and examine different sorts of texts at the same time, and each text influences our interpretation of the others. For example, our interpretation of a written report is affected by our previous knowledge of the writer and our own observation of the signs in the social that the writer is reporting on.

To illustrate these explanations, think of a group of social work students reading about poverty in a social work textbook. The students (the audience) interpret (read) the letters,

words and sentences (the signs, containing signifiers and signified) in the book according to their understanding of social work, their personal experience of poverty and their existing knowledge and understanding of political positions, empirical evidence and cultural views about poverty (their referents). Many possibilities of different experiences may affect their reading. For example, some may be mainly interested in mental health problems and not perceive poverty as important to their main interests, so they may pay little attention to reading this book. Therefore, although the book appears to be a single, clear source for their reading, and the author will have struggled to make it rational, well-organised and accurate, its text and the signs that make it up are perceived and interpreted by individuals with a complex array of referents. Every reading will be different.

Some aspects of meaning are embedded in the signs in a text, therefore, but meaning is also drawn out by the reader's interpretation, affected by the reader's referents and by the activities of the reader in the process of reading the text (Fish, 1980: 2); for example the reader might make notes on the page, or keep a separate notebook about readings such as the things they notice during an interview. Moreover, the meaning that a reader interprets from the signs in a text changes over time. At the beginning of the reading, their interpretation of the signs they are reading will be provisional; when they have finished the physical act of passing their eyes over the signs on the page, or observing an interpersonal interaction, they may make a different interpretation of the earlier signs, because they now have a wider context of understanding from the full text. Later, thinking about what they have read, making notes, writing an essay, producing case notes about an interview, their reading may change further. All readings, therefore, are temporal: they develop and change over time.

To some degree, the signs in the text impose constraints on the reading that is possible, but the signs also make alternative interpretations available to readers. For example, the poverty chapter read by the group of students makes it clear that poverty is relative. This means that we cannot identify a specific level of income



as defining when an individual is in poverty; the text constrains in this way how the students think about poverty. In understanding this, the students have the opportunity to find in the text a wide range of possible factors that will affect whether someone is seen as being in poverty, and they may evaluate some factors a more important than others. Or they may reject the argument, and thus other materials available to them in the text.

Reading is also multimodal in its nature: it is not just language that communicates. Things have physical features that make them distinctive, so they carry communication about thoughts, communities, identities and experiences and indicate what is valued or devalued by the author of a text. Such communication may be openly displayed or hidden to be evoked by language use physical characteristics (Pahl, Rowsell, 2013). With written or printed texts, for example, we are affected by images associated with it, the layout of the text and the use of colour (Flewitt, 2013). We can also make changes, by highlighting part of the text, or making marginal notes. In interpersonal communication, we are affected by sound, texture, bodily orientation to one another, bodily movements, gesture, gaze, artefacts involved in the interaction and language use. For example, checking notes or a printed text while we are speaking may give a spoken statement authority, or may detract from it by suggesting that the speaker does not fully understand or agree with the material being communicated. Objects in our environment are also relevant to reading. This may include habitus, the experience of our lives that shapes everyday activity, and material culture, such as our use of technology. For example, we may interpret someone as 'up-to-date' because they use a tablet computer rather than an ancient tome; unless, of course, we are concerned with historical evidence.

Another aspect of reading is that it is not wholly an individual action. Readers are part of 'interpretive communities' (Fish, 1980), which share their readings. They may do this formally, for example, the students may discuss their various interpretations of the poverty text in a seminar, or they may be part of a social grouping that is sympathetic to some but not to other interpretations. For example, social work

students are more likely to be in a social group that takes the political position that poverty is created by economic and social pressures rather than individual failings. So among social work students, dissonant readings of the situation that emphasise individual contributions to poverty are less likely to occur than among a wider population.

Gillen and Hall (2013) note that the capacity to understand language emerges, as well as being taught: this provides space for non-authoritative interpretations of texts also to emerge. The expectations of reading express a culture which provides a scaffolding of ways of responding to texts that structures how we deal with social situations. For example, social work practitioners are trained to observe and interpret behaviour in interviews and to understand theoretical discourses in social work textbooks.

An important consideration in teaching reading to young children is to understand the range of skills necessary to be able to read. I have applied and renamed Merchant's (2008: 86) account of five elements of reading skill to identify potential skills involved in reading social work:

- Source awareness – knowledge about different types of information that may be available in a text, for example comparing information spoken by a client with information drawn from observations about how the client speaks and how others react. In cultural studies, these different types of source are called 'genres'.
- Structural awareness – knowledge about how texts and behaviours may be structured in social work interactions, for example how the starting point of an interview leads on to an exploration of issues.
- Concept recognition – the ability to recognise concepts being used in social work texts, for example, different kinds of theoretical ideas.
- Difference awareness – knowledge about how to identify similar issues in different contexts and to recognise differences in apparently similar issues. For example, the social worker meeting a woman with facial bruising may surmise that she has experienced domestic violence. Seeing later an important disagreement between husband and wife carried out courteously may disconfirm this reading of the situation. When the woman's



doctor reports that she has been falling regularly and that a neurological condition has been diagnosed, another reading of the situation is possible.

- Link awareness – knowledge about how ostensibly different texts may be linked with other apparently different texts. For example practitioners need to know how to interpret differences in professional jargon and priorities between medical reports and police reports of events in a family.

The way people approach and think about reading is affected by an underlying political standpoint (Lambirth, 2011). A conservative approach to reading assumes that the reader is an essentially passive receiver of the contents of the text. In this view, ‘efficient’ reading enables a reader to extract an authorised, appropriate or planned messages from the text as quickly as possible, and effective writing aims to express the message unambiguously. Training in reading and writing seeks to achieve capability at this level of effectiveness. In this view, ambiguity, atmosphere, style, complexity and similar aspects of a text are devalued. Such an approach sees reading as a matter of efficiency: learning to read involves developing the necessary skills, which can then be exercised on any texts that a person meets. An alternative view proposes that literacy changes throughout an individual’s lifecourse, and their capacity to read particular texts varies, for example their skills in reading social situations to detect whether people are lying may improve if they have a lot of practice at this task. People’s reading may also alter, depending on the social situation they are in. For example, they may use different reading skills in work and in informal situations (Wolf, Evans, 2011), or they may read fluently to themselves, but stumble when reading aloud, because they are affected by performance anxiety.

A Marxist standpoint notes that reading participates in power relations: influence in social relations derives from the capacity to extract information from texts. This view acknowledges that reading consists not only of a relationship between author and reader, but also within wider social relationships in which they are engaged. The task of reading may have an impact on those relationships, by generating

greater knowledge on the part of a reader that gives them influence over others. Alternatively, the author may lose power by giving up exclusive understanding of the matters covered in a text, or gain power by being regarded as having expertise.

A postmodernist position, therefore, challenges the possibility of certainties in creating and reading texts, and proposes that to understand reading, we need to explore a wide range of factors in the social situation within which the reading takes place. Such a view questions the construction of clarity and power, noting the importance of being able to detect ironies, uncertainties and multiple messages.

Language is a complex system and to express and extract meaning from a text requires the coordinated action of four elements

- Phonology: mapping sounds and elements of language onto meaning
- Semantics: extracting meaning from texts
- Grammar: concerned with how words language systems are combined and differentiated to convey different meanings
- Pragmatics: the contexts that influence how language is used (Carroll et al., 2011).

Among the skills involved in using words are the capacity to encode and decode meaning into and from the letters or tone of a text, to make analogies between new ideas and things we already understand, to predict what a full communication will be from the beginning point, and the ability to recognise and understand words on sight, rather than having to spell out the letters to ourselves or look their meaning up in a dictionary. We also need fluency, the capacity to use words expressively, meaningfully and accurately at a speed that enables other people to communicate with us. Our vocabulary, the range of things that we know about and can understand, enlarges incrementally: in steps we learn more things, We also develop the capacity to understand multidimensionally, that is, we can understand different things about a text. Examples that might affect our judgement include how spoken and written forms differ, when things are correctly or incorrectly expressed, whether ideas are commonplace or original, whether there are multiple or conflicting meanings





Achieving comprehension of a written text, or understanding of a social situation is, therefore, an interactive process in which the people involved share in the process of constructing a meaning together, and requires decoding ability, prior knowledge and experience all of which is tied to their community and culture. It also requires engagement, an emotional involvement in the process of responding to the content which enables us to work at arriving at understanding (Combs, 2012).

### Reading and discourse

How should we distinguish 'reading' from discourse analysis? Howarth (2000) identifies three main historical elements to the idea of discourse.

The first of these elements is the idea of investigating 'language in use' and 'talk in context' as part of linguistics, particularly social linguistics. Reading involves understanding content in context in both written and spoken texts.

The second of the elements of discourse analysis is its extension by phenomenological sociologists, ethnomethodologists and post-structuralists, in particular Foucault (1972), to investigate wider social practices, which at least in Foucault's later work include how discourses shaped by social practices that in turn shape social institutions and their use of power. A distinctive feature of this form of discourse analysis is its political and ideological focus on how exploring discourse enables us to understand hidden or veiled power relations. These ideas are particularly useful in social work to enable us to read power relations that may be found in written and spoken texts.

The third element of discourse analysis is its extension in investigations such as Fairclough's (1992: 12) 'critical discourse analysis' to non-discursive practices in a wider range of social relations; he includes published academic work as a potential source of texts for such analysis. In this research procedure, audio and video recordings of conversations are analysed in detail to reveal hidden interpersonal and political processes. Reading of events and written texts as I have described it here is a broader and more global consideration of the evidence in discourses within social work and other social relations.

Reading and its technology developed in education, and cultural and media studies, potentially extends our thinking processes in social work and related professional areas beyond discourse analysis. Using reading skills encourages a self-critical and thoughtful analysis of the materials that we study and use in everyday life, but may also provide a technology for empirical research using written documents.

### The exhibits: reading as method

In this section, I examine four texts to illustrate the richness of opportunity for extracting evidence by generating a discourse about readings of texts. I have selected two pairs of texts. The first pair consists of written texts produced in social work, a case record and a record of a practice education assessment made in a pro forma document. The second pair is drawn from introductory textbooks about social work published in the UK in 2009 and 2014.

The genre of this text is 'professional record'. The text is an entry in a hospital social work record is about a recent interview by a social worker providing bereavement care, in this case for a woman who has suffered a miscarriage. It has been anonymised. I have divided it for reference into ten sections. The first section is an artefact of the record's inclusion in this paper: it contains a brief summary of previously obtained (for example, marital history) and contextual information (for example of the interview's location) to enable us to make sense of the interview record.

Case recordings have a large number of potential uses, but most commonly they provide notes to remind a practitioner of what took place, to maintain continuity of work in the future. They also provide accountability of the practitioner to a manager or supervisor of the practice or service. Other uses may include helping the practitioner to reflect on events, and to allow information for research to be extracted (Askeland, Payne, 1999).

The exhibit provides for interpretation of two readings. One is the practitioner's reading of the human interaction in the interview; an example is section 2, which describes the client's physical, and perhaps emotional, state.



**Exhibit 1: A professional case recording**

1	Rosie, aged 32, lives with her husband and three-year-old son. She was seen in the hospital. The family lives in an urban area and Rosie is of Indian origin whilst her husband's family is from the middle east. Both come from middle class families who were immigrants to this country. The couple have been married for 10 years and have been experiencing relationship difficulties and have had a succession of rows.
2	Today, Rosie appeared exhausted.
3	She readily talked about her recent miscarriage and the three weeks duration of doubts, uncertainties and upset among the admissions to hospital and final miscarriage.
4	I encouraged her to express her feelings of disappointment and grief that she was experiencing.
5	She spoke of her huge stresses which had added to the pressure she was under and had caused her to 'freeze' her emotions:
6	a major re-organisation at work which held the threat of redundancy for her and the important assignment she had to hand in at the time of her miscarriage and threat of failing her degree course.
7	A major row with her husband had been sparked over what she acknowledged was a relatively minor matter. She had lost her temper and she, at one point, flew at her husband and attempted to strangle him. He restrained her and this was an isolated incident of physical violence in the 10 years of their marriage. Rosie talked about how frustrated she becomes about her husband's lack of support. We discussed if she and her husband would consider couple counselling.
8	At 10 minutes before the end of the session, I asked Rosie if there was anything else she had come to talk about. Our session was extended by 30 minutes while Rosie talked about the anger she still felt, of the friend she had been able to talk to and how her relationship with her mother was now close and supportive.
9	She paused for a while, then began to cry quite emotionally. She began to recount in detail and disclose a period of sexual abuse she had experienced between the ages of 10 – 13 years- old by her step-father and her mother's avoidance of the issue whenever she attempted to discuss it. Her step father was now dead and she had talked to her husband about it when they first met.
10	We booked another session to follow up some of the issues that we had covered and Rosie appeared to be relieved that she had spoken of her earlier trauma.

The second reading is our reading of the text of the record.

What may we find in the author's reading of the interview? He carries into the event and the record his previous knowledge about the couple life and marital history. It starts with an observation about her appearance of exhaustion, and finishes with her appearance of relief at discussing previous trauma in the interview. The beginning observation might be relevant in a healthcare setting, where there has been a recent serious medical event. He reports four interventions, the first being early on in the interview when he encourages the client to express feelings. Later, he discusses whether the client and her husband might

take up couple counselling. Then, towards then end of the session he invites her to talk about any other topics. Finally, he books a further session. Otherwise, the text simply reports matters that the client talked about. This is a common characteristic of social work records: they focus on the client and the practitioner's participation is shadowy and probably underplayed. In this way, the record emphasises the personal memoir objective of recording, rather than the accountability aspect. Matters reported that seem to be important to the author are emotions and events which might be interpreted as problematic. Among such emotions are disappointment, freezing, losing her temper, anger; and among the events



are threats of redundancy and of failure in her university course, a major row with her husband and her sexual abuse by her step-father. The impression given is of a woman affected negatively by disastrous events and powerful emotions, but of little active intervention by the practitioner aside from encouraging her to make these revelations. There is concept recognition in his invitation (at 4) to discuss disappointment and grief, (at 5) his picking out freezing emotions and (at 8) his identification of anger in her emotions: these perhaps come from theoretical ideas about bereavement, since that is the context of his work.

My reading, as a person external to the interview, draws on the author/practitioner's text; this is true of any other outsider to the interview. A narrative emerges. It starts from the history of relationship difficulties, moves through the observation of exhaustion, through the account of stresses at work and on her course, the major row with the husband and the step-father's sexual abuse. This presents us with a story of a woman in a whirlwind of events and emotions; the initial observation may be seen not as a possibly healthcare-related concern, but as a narrative preparation for the 'whirlwind' interpretation. There are discontinuities in this narrative: early on, he asks about feelings of disappointment and grief, yet she talks about practical things in her work and university course, apparently rejecting his request for emotional material in favour of the practical. This discontinuity points to the disparity between the service aims (a bereavement service) and the actual content of the interview (her emotional responses to life problems). At 8, she talks about positive relationships that help deal with her anger, but the following content (at 9) is about sexual abuse by her step-father. The juxtaposing of this material suggests either a contrast between her mother now (supportive) and then (avoiding) or in the author/practitioner's emphasis on recording the emotional reaction to her life problems. Some of these were historical (in the manner of psychodynamic practice) rather than emphasising, exploring and possibly reinforcing the positives in her current life (in the manner of solution-focused practice). Moreover, the focus on the bereavement service provided here was on feelings and reactions to

the client's situation, whereas there has been criticism (Howarth, 2006; Holloway, 2007) that bereavement services focus too much on the psychological rather than the social.

How may we read this record in relation to the various aims of such records? The main focus seems to be in creating an *aide memoire* to assist the practitioner in remembering the problem discussed. One element of agency accountability may be present in the note that the session was extended: this may refer to the need to justify the author's lack of control of the interview process, or to justify additional time in the practitioner's work schedule or in fee payment if he works on an hourly-paid basis.

If we consider the text in relation to professional accountability, another meaning of the narrative presented emerges. Taylor and White (2000) suggest that accounts of many social work interactions may be read as attempts to justify the appropriateness of their actions and behaviour. Similarly, Garfinkel's classic paper (1967) proposes in relation to 'clinic records' that they are always written with a view to the necessity of the practitioner being able to claim that their actions conform to the agency's administrative requirements. Pithouse (1998) in a study of social work supervision in a child care context, argues that professional supervision in social work consists of the practitioner relating a narrative of the client's circumstances designed to display the practitioner's ability to gain access to increasingly complex emotional and behavioural material about the client's life. Practitioners were evaluated as successful the more they were able to generate detailed and intimate material of this kind. The practitioner in Exhibit 1 is providing a bereavement service in a hospital setting. Therefore, it is likely that he will be valued to the extent that he grapples with the emotional and behavioural, since his speciality in the setting is the non-medical emotional consequences of medical events. Thus, the initial observation is not a medical concern, but a preparation for the 'whirlwind' of revelations, all his interventions aim to get the client to talk about emotional troubles, and his final observation (at 10) of the client's relief at making the revelations, justifies this piece of work as successful because of the client's emotional reaction to it.



This perception may also affect the client’s engagement in the process. It is possible to read what goes on here as a performance (Payne, 2009b): the client takes the opportunity of bereavement to receive help with issues in her life that have nothing to do with her bereavement. She perceives the requirement of such a service to rehearse emotional and psychological issues, and responds with such issues when the practitioner, pursuing his agency and professional assumptions asks for issues to be raised. In a hidden way, they respond to their perceptions of the social requirements of being bereaved and receiving and offering bereavement service and therefore show to each other and only respond to the emotional and psychological aspects of the situation.

**Exhibit 2: Direct observation proforma**

Direct Observation Proforma to be used for Practice Educator Stage 1 and Stage 2 ...Jane demonstrated skills in giving feedback to the student about her direct observation of the student’s practice. (C5, C8) There were a number of examples of these skills as follows: ...

- Jane gave feedback about areas of the student’s practice that could have been stronger and placed these in the context of areas for development rather than major problems. The way that Jane did this was to use questions; for example, she asked the student to think about her understanding of what leads children to have behavioural difficulties. Jane rephrased the question as the student struggled to answer and she made it more specific saying ‘what’s your understanding of why this child had behavioural difficulties?’ In this way, Jane was able to help the student link her knowledge, in this case of attachment theory, with her practice. By exploring the student’s knowledge and what she had actually done, Jane was able to help the student identify why she had not applied her knowledge to practice in this case. The student identified that she was trying to protect the service user from

becoming upset. Jane was then able to help clarify the role of the professional in this situation of asking some difficult questions in order to help get the right outcome for children. Jane was able to explore ways that the student could help the family to start to address the difficult and painful issues by asking open questions about the family network. (B1, B4, C3, C9)

- Jane followed a similar process to explore another area of the student’s development which was about the student’s response to the family when they were talking about some of the difficulties that they had experienced. Jane asked the student to think about her own experiences of being helped by others and the use of the importance of noticing when people have demonstrated strengths in sorting out their own problems. Jane explained this in the context of using solution focussed methods and gave an example of how celebrating success is part of the solution focussed methodology. The student expressed her agreement with Jane and gave an example of how she could have done this and how that she has noticed other practitioners doing this. There followed a discussion about the student developing her own way of doing this that she felt comfortable with. Jane advised on how the student could find out more information about the solution focussed method in discussion. (B1, B4, B8, C3, C9)

This text is an excerpt from a much longer document and reports the assessment decisions of an observer, acting as an assessor on behalf of a higher education institution (HEI) providing a ‘practice educator’ course. It has been anonymised. Successful completion of such a course qualifies an experienced social work practitioner to supervise and assess students undertaking practice experience in an agency as part of a qualifying social work degree. The text is a proforma, that is, there is a standard format set by boxes on pages of a document stored on a computer, and participants have to do certain things to fulfil all the requirements and enable



the report to be completed. Moreover, there are referents (represented by the signs such as B1, C5) to the idea of competence in practice education and competences (defined elements of the overall competence, that the trainee practice educator is required to demonstrate. These referents in turn refer to the construction of competencies in practice teaching, and the idea of defining qualification requirements as a series of defined competences to be demonstrated by candidates.

As with Exhibit 3, Exhibit 4 provides information about several readings, even more than the layers of readings in Exhibit 3. First, the student has read the human interaction in the interview with a client (equivalent to the practitioner's reading of the interview in Exhibit 3). Second, the student has reported on this reading of the client interview to the trainee practice educator, in a student supervision session conducted by her (Jane), and she has therefore read both interviews, one reading being of the written report and narrative provided by the student, and another reading being of the supervision session. Third, for the purposes of assessing the trainee practice teacher, an assessor from the HEI has observed and, in the process of doing so, read the student supervision session. Finally, we, as outsiders to the event, read the text of the report on the observation; this is the equivalent of our external reading of the text of the record in Exhibit 3. The media of the initial readings are interpersonal, while the final reading is of a document, the proforma.

This is an excerpt from a very lengthy document, and the element that conveys information about the original interview with the client is minimal, but we can see in the first bullet point that the child had behavioural difficulties, that the student had wanted to protect the client from being upset (but this was in some respects considered inappropriate professional behaviour by the practice educator in the next level of reading) and had therefore not focused on attachment difficulties with the family. The second bullet point discloses a discussion with family members which focused on problems rather than strengths, again considered inappropriate at the next level of reading.

The main focus of the document is the teaching

session between student and practice educator. The structure is not in the form of a narrative; instead it draws out various points selected by competence requirements of the practice educator. In the case of this excerpt, skills in feeding back the practice educator's reading of the interview with the clients to the student are at issue. Although this is a reading, the practice educator's view is regarded as authoritative, perhaps because of her assessment role, but, if so, it is not finally authoritative, because it is assessed in turn by the HEI's assessor in her observation of the teaching session. This demonstrates a politics in the relations between the HEI assessor, the practice educator and the student.

Moreover, the structure of the bullet points is in a standard format: points in the student's interview on which feedback was given are used to describe the skills demonstrated by the practice educator and an assessment is made about the success of the practice educator's actions. These are then connected to the numbered listings of competences that the practice educator is required to demonstrate.

Two social work theoretical concepts are used; attachment theory and solution-focused ideas. The first bullet point refers to understanding of explanatory theory, while the second bullet point refers to the student's understanding of ways of helping. The division of these into separate bullet points illustrates difference awareness: the use of the theory being explored and the learning to be gained from it is understood by the participants to be different. The points are linked, however, by their both being used in the proforma to demonstrate skills in feedback, and we can see from the similar reference numbers to the competencies list that they also refer mostly to the same competences, even though they are ostensibly different points. These distinctions also illustrate a particular grammar and semantics associated with texts that extract competences from texts that are interpersonal interactions. The semantic is the decoding and signifying of particular named or signed (signs in this case in the form: letter-number) competences from behaviour that is concerned with the direct purposes of the interaction, and the grammar is the structure of the text, described in the previous paragraph:



student interview > feedback > skill demonstrated > assessment > signification.

Comparing the element of performance that I suggested might be a factor in my reading of Exhibit 3, the required structure of this document also illustrates a different way in which performance may be generated by the structuring of a formalised signification process. Both the student and the practice educator are required to demonstrate competences. The student must make errors in practice, but not fatal errors that result in failure, so that the practice educator may extract matters to feed back on and on which she can do some educating. The HEI assessor is required to identify negative feedback that results in educating going on in the discussions between student and practice educator. In this way an apparently innocuous series of interactions can be given educational and, in the context of this document perhaps more important, assessment meaning. The participants might behave cynically ('we've got to show this, so let's have the conversations so we can document the competences') or faithfully ('it's important to go through these processes in a professionally appropriate manner') or they may achieve revelatory significance ('it's amazing when you look at these events in detail how much comes out of them'). Perhaps there are elements of all three, and in case you think it excessive to imagine that the prosaic events described might be revelatory, it is important to remember that literary criticism and biblical scholarship are often described in these terms ('I never realised there was so much in it').

**Exhibits 3 and 4: Introductory academic texts**

Exhibit 3

**Conclusion**

The main focus of this chapter has been the development of an understanding of what social work is, a picture of what it involves. This was tackled in three ways. First, I outlined the differences between social work and the other helping professions or human services more broadly, and the commonalities across them. Second, I explored a number of attempts to define social work, but without

getting bogged down in trying to pin down a precise definitive statement. Third, I argued that social work is 'up for grabs' in the sense that what constitutes social work depends on the outcomes of attempts by powerful groups and institutions to shape social work policy and practice. On this basis, I then proposed my own 'submission' of how social work should be seen by relating it to some of the key themes of a particular school of philosophy, named existentialism.

My aim has not been to close the debate or provide a once-and-for-all solution, as that would be both unhelpful and unrealistic. Rather, I have attempted to provide a picture of the complex reality of social work, together with some guidelines as to what I see as a useful and constructive way forward. In this regard, this chapter has provided a foundation for the chapters that follow, each of which should help to develop the beginnings of understanding presented here.

Thompson, N. (2009) *Understanding Social Work*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 27.

Exhibit 4

**Summary**

This book aims to illustrate how social work is a varied profession that works with individuals, families, groups and communities. As this chapter has discussed, social work has an aim of promoting human growth and development as well as promoting social justice. Such aims can only be met by considering and working with individuals, but equally with communities and within larger social, economic and political structures. In order to work competently and effectively, social workers must have knowledge of theories, methods and legislation, have skills to work with individuals, families, groups and communities, and adhere to the values and ethical principles of the profession. Therefore, the profession requires individuals who are competent, motivated and ready





to take on the challenge of gaining the knowledge and skills and promoting the aims of the profession, I hope this book serves as a useful tool as you begin on this journey.

Teater, B. Introduction. In Teater, B. (Ed.). *Contemporary Social Work Practice: A Handbook for Students*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2014, p. 9.

The genre of these two exhibits is the introductory academic text: in this case, the final paragraph of the first chapter of two textbooks introducing social work. One is signed as a conclusion, the other as a summary. Structurally, neither is a climactic moment of revelation about the nature of social work: instead, both are texts to perform structural tasks in the wider document: they summarise what has gone before and signpost what is to come.

I want to treat these two texts as a variorum: a variorum explores the detailed differences between two versions of a piece of writing, for example, two editions from different publishers of a Shakespeare play. In this case, I am extending the meaning of a variorum, because we are reading two versions from different authors of how to introduce social work. In content, these chapter endings reveal different approaches to teaching an introduction to social work. Exhibit 3 places social work among helping professions, Exhibit 4 sees it as a varied profession; here there is no comparison or contextualisation of the profession. Exhibit 3 has explored definitions of social work, while Exhibit 4 has identified different types of practice and different aims. Exhibit 3 introduces a process view in which social work is socially constructed as part of power relations, while Exhibit 4 moves on to discuss the knowledge required for competent and effective practice, implying an acceptance of ascriptions of social work roles. Exhibit 3 proposes philosophical analysis of the nature of social work, while Exhibit 4 identifies traits of the successful practitioner. The second paragraph of Chapter 3 seeks to demonstrate the possibility of openness in interpretation, while the last part of Exhibit 4 makes clear what is expected.

Phonologically, the elements of language used vary, and this leads to a different semantic. Both are not academically and linguistically formal; for example, both sometimes use 'I' to refer to the author. But both show ambivalence about informality. In Exhibit 3, for example, the author starts with the passive 'The main focus of this chapter has been...' rather than saying 'My main focus in this chapter...', but then he goes on to say '...I outlined...I explored...I argued...I then proposed'. Another element of formality is the use of the legalism 'as to' in the second paragraph. A now old-fashioned guide to English grammar (Gowers, 1981: 36) explains why this is dubious: '...*as to* is usually either a slovenly substitute for some simple preposition...or it is entirely otiose...'. In this case, the author means '...some guidelines on [or 'about'] what I see...'. While formally the phrase is redundant because a simpler preposition may be used, 'as to' is commonly used in everyday speech as a linguistic marker of 'serious explanation coming up'. In this way, its use fits with the colloquial linguistic style of the rest of this exhibit: '...getting bogged down...trying to pin down...“up for grabs”... once-and-for-all...'; the quotation marks round 'up-for-grabs' indicate the author's recognition that a more conventional approach to academic texts would not include such colloquiality; it seems he judges that this phrase is a step further than the others, so needs to be marked as a colloquialism, or perhaps he just wants to point up how deviant he is. The author in Exhibit 4 is more formal altogether, and eschews colloquial style. The starting language is formal and passive: 'This book aims to illustrate...'. As this chapter has discussed...' In contrast to Exhibit 3, the authorial 'I' enters only in the last few words in a direct address to the reader. These differences in style demonstrate different approaches to the context of the author-reader relationship in an introductory text: Exhibit 3 seeks to be stylistically 'the student's friend', while Exhibit 4 is more teacherly.

To compare the central issues presented by these texts, the most striking aspect of Exhibit 3 is its assertion of the complexity and social construction of social work and its rejection of definition while the constantly repeated mantra of 'individuals, families, groups and



communities' constitutes a *leitmotif* for Exhibit 4. Thus, while these texts conclude chapters which bring a new student into contact with ideas about the nature of social work for the first time, what they think it important to emphasise (while urging students forward to the next stage of their learning) is disparate.

### **Discussion: reading as method**

I started this paper by suggesting that the concept of reading situations and documents in social work offered a rich analogy for some of the things that are often discussed in social work. In this discussion, I want to explore some of the possibilities.

One important reason for thinking about reading as a way of understanding social work is the complexity of human interactions and representations of them that much social work involves, and the restrictiveness of other concepts that we use to describe them. The concept of assessment, for example, although there are a range of models, some of which involve clients in the process (Milner, O'Byrne, 2009) assumes that the social worker makes an appraisal of a situation from an expert position, often leading to the allocation of resources or delivery of services on behalf of an agency. While the ideal concept of a social work assessment is not a closed process, but is renewed or reviewed as engagement with clients proceeds, the reality in an agency is often of a rapid early series of judgements on which future action, often authoritative action, is based. In some cases, the assessment contains moral elements or requires a moral judgement on behalf of society, for example with offenders, or in child abuse (Payne, 1999). In social work, assessments provide a degree of certainty, a scaffolding, for the development of a set of ideas about a case, which then lead on to action, often set or bounded by the rules and requirements of the agency. Even if the practitioner is forced to meet the agency's requirements, seeing the assessment process as a reading enables the practitioner to maintain an understanding of justifiable ambiguities in the initial process and allows for flexibility in later reassessments and actions.

In later engagements, although agency requirements demand an assessment, the practitioner can continue to read situations

they are involved with and official records they prepare and peruse in a more open way. They can also be open to cynicism or caution about aspects of shared performance or revelation through reading that I have discussed, particularly thinking about Exhibits 1 and 2.

A further useful idea drawn from ideas about reading is that of the 'interpretive community' (Fish, 1980) suggesting that we not only individually derive meaning from texts of all kinds, but share our reading with people from related social environments. Assessment runs the risk of accepting apparently shared interpretations as true constructions, and may lead to shared blindness rather than critical accountability. The idea of reading and the availability of multiple readings, and the levels of readings identified, as in my discussion of Exhibits 1 and 2, where we noted an initial interpersonal reading followed by observers' readings and external readers' readings alert us to partially hidden aspect of the process of interpretation. There is a possibility of alternative readings available for debate even within the same interpretive community. Thus, as in the assessment of educational competences in Exhibit 2, the reading of an evaluation may be coloured by the value given in social work education to interpersonal feedback as a tool in the educational process of learning skills; readers can evaluate what has happened in the layers of readings of innocuous events of what is important from their own experience as part of the interpretive community. Garfinkel (1967) suggested that a skilled and experienced insider can interpret clinicians' deviances from behaviour required in their agency by looking at their clinic records even though these are written to show their compliance, while a naïve outsider might accept the record as demonstrating compliance. This does not matter in most practical circumstances, because in most cases behaviour is not questioned, the records are not read in detail and questioned by outsiders, and because insiders understand and can work within their interpretive community's understanding of the records. It is only when there is a serious event, and outsiders pore in detail over records that they are often revealed to have lacunae, and in some instances these reveal failures, or fail to demonstrate complete



compliance. The only recourse then is to the bureaucracy of compulsory record-keeping, and the tyranny of 'if you haven't written it, it didn't happen' often nowadays enforced through computer systems that do not permit action unless all the details are completed. In this way, an interpretive community may become an oppressive form of external control of practice, or self-censorship, or alternatively a mechanism of inquiry within the agency. While an interpretive community always exists and cannot be avoided, practitioners and managers can generate sharing that is positive and supportive or negative and controlling.

A second important reason for thinking about reading as an approach to understanding social work is its focus on detailed analysis of texts, in a way that generally is not characteristic of social work academic work. Much debate about theory is based on generalisations in particular about political positions or trends in the use of ideas, rather than the detailed analysis of texts, distinguishing what the authors' case and argument is. Many pieces of writing about social work accept selected citation to work of interest to the author, rather than coverage of the range of commentary on particular topics.

A third aspect of the importance of reading is the capacity for it to uncover ambiguous and hidden aspects of apparently straightforward material and to raise questions about it. The completely different emphases of Exhibits 3 and 4, bring home differences in the conception of what is important about social work that exist in the social work academy, and appropriate ways of teaching about it.

The fourth point about identifying reading as an important analogy for the process of exploring the nature of social work in its actions and documentation, is that if we do so, it opens up the study of social work processes to another form of empirical processing. It is possible to design research to identify the range of alternative readings that different readers make of the same text, and to identify the contextual and other factors that generate those different in reading. It is also possible to clarify different readings of situations by different participants, rather than relying on the professional analysis of the accurate interpretation of events. Many of these methods allow statistical processing,

for example of usages on concepts, theoretical and other sources, and widely-used behavioural sequences and processes evidenced in documents and interpersonal interactions.

The readings of the texts discussed as examples here and the points I have chosen to highlight illustrate how the cultural and media studies conceptualisation of dealing with documentary evidence enables us to incorporate alternative readings into social science methods. We can achieve this in three main ways:

- By enabling us to develop a battery of concepts which offers a terminology for consistently constructing alternative readings of particular texts. For example, a number of similar documents such as case records can be analysed to identify linguistic devices, terminology, concepts across several authors and readers.
- By empirical research on alternative readings of the same or similar documents for example by structured
- By collecting alternative readings of the same situation, through comparing alternative modes or genres, for example how official, internet and academic texts analyse the elements of social work, or by comparing analyses from different countries.

### Conclusion

Thinking about reading, as with discourse analysis, permits us to reveal a rich range of information about interpersonal and institutional processes from documentation or events, which would otherwise be hidden from view.

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#### Notes

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# Becoming a Professional. Improving Social Action through Letter Writing in Social Work Education

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## Abstract

Social work takes place in multi-professional contexts. These contexts require skills in understanding meaning in order to intermediate from different perspectives in order to deal with cases successfully. Taking or looking at perspectives which differ from our own, and using them is - from a theoretical point of view - defined as dialogue (Kloepfer, 1982; Mead, 1965). A dialogue understanding as a “meeting of minds” (Mead 1965, 52) happens mostly during conversations, and also to a lesser degree from written information. Given the epistemic potential of writing for social work (Dias et al., 1999; White, Epston, 1990), this article specifically proves the potential of the study writing to initiate and keep up dialogical conversations in order to become a well-educated social worker. Therefore it discusses letter writing and its dialogical potential from a trans-disciplinary perspective, and through an empirical study of a series of letters written by social work students. The analysis methodologically involves grounded theory procedures (Straus, Corbin, 1990; Bromberg, 2014), and makes use of analytical methods, usually used for autobiographical narrative interviews (Riemann 2003; Schütze 2008). Along with the analysis, it will show how both addressed writing, as provided from letters, serve professional attitudes and acting through dialogical communication, promote dealings from different perspectives required in multi-professional social work contexts. The general idea that letters help us become better professional social (case) workers that Mary E. Richmond made nearly hundred years ago can now be verified by theoretical and empirical insights.

## Keywords

dialogue, self-reflection, writing, letter, social work, professional



## Introduction

Social Work is said to have become aware of the epistemic potential of writing very early on in its emergence as a profession (Dias et al., 1999: 125). As far as I can see this holds true at least for the pioneer of social case work, Mary E. Richmond (1922). In order to professionalize social case work she compares social actions from friendly neighbours with specialists in social case work. One of the essential differences between these is that only specialists have the scientific know-how to keep “accurate notes, made at the time, of his [or her, K.B.] methods and results” (Richmond, 1922: 8). Thus very early in the history of social work as a profession, Richmond defines systematic writings as one of its main features. In addition we can say, generally, that writing promotes thinking<sup>2</sup>. The immediate and mutual relationship of writing and thinking provokes the production of knowledge. Ethnography for example uses this relationship to arrive at analytical insights via extensive writing (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 2010). From a common sense point of view, it is often said that only clear thoughts can be formulated clearly. The idea behind this statement is that you must think clearly, so you can formulate clearly. This is only true if you look at it superficially. This underestimates the functionality of the writing process, because writing promotes thinking (Becker 1986) If we consider this, we could wonder why Richmond does not suggest writing in general, rather preferring letters in order to develop a professional attitude and action. In her introduction into social case work she writes: “At almost weekly intervals during that first year, Miss Sullivan [teacher of the famous Helen Keller, K.B.] wrote to a friend [...] giving her not so much the educational details of a task with which her correspondent was already familiar, but describing new situations, many of them social, with which she found herself confronted, and added the frankest possible reports of her own mental processes in trying to solve these problems. So we have in the letters not only *what* happened but *how* it happened, and the teacher’s own reactions as well as the pupil’s” (Richmond, 1922: 10). We can clearly see that not only are the content of social situations relevant to develop

professional actions but also the continuing social process. Unfortunately, Richmond did not make any points as to why letters serve even better than diaries to helping a social (case) worker, which is why this article is seeking answers. But not only in the past, even in current times, there is a lot we can read in social work publications about the power that written language has in supporting social workers in making sense of complex information and situations in general (Dias et al., 1999: 125).<sup>3</sup> Written notes allow social workers to focus on their role in a particular case, to take a closer look at their own practice. Writings create self-reflection<sup>4</sup> that improves practice (Dias et al., 1999: 125).

Self-reflection here is linked not only to the individual social worker but rather to other team members as well. Though there is clearly a great benefit in improving one’s professional habits and actions, at the same time “institutional demands (the struggles among competing interests) suppress narrative, speculation and elaboration – all the lengthy and messy uses of language that promote exploratory thought” (Paré, 2000: 161). Even if we find a differentiated Anglo-Saxon discourse about academic and scientific texts (e.g. Russel, Cortes, 2012; in a more general perspective university writing Castelló, Donahue, 2012) and their effects on developments in academic professions (e.g. Dias et al., 1999; Dias, Paré, 2000; Le Maistre, Paré, 2004; Paré, 2000) there seems to be no theoretical discussion and knowledge about the features, possibilities and benefits of letter writing in particular.<sup>5</sup> Against this background this paper calls for a better study of letter writing for the benefit of increasing the professionalism of social workers in general. If, for example, a letter is generally characterized by a unique relationship between writer and recipient (Simmel, 2009: 342), having the dialogical quality as its basic marker (Kloepfer, 1981: 319; Nikisch, 1991: 229), we have to ask if letters are as much dialogical as they are said to be.

According to dialogue and writing research, dialogical communication structures clearly have a greater potential for learning and processing insights compared to monologist ones (from a literary studies view see Kloepfer, 1981:





318; Schröder, Steger, 1981; from a linguistic perspective see Lea, Street, 1998: 158; Lillis, 2003). So, we have to clarify the relationship of dialogue and professionalization provided from letters. What is the meaning of the term “dialogical insight”? How is this realized in letters written by social work students and what then is the benefit for social workers? Or, in other words: how does this writing process affect the professionalization of social workers? In order to answer these questions, we first need to find out to what extent a letter provokes a students’ development in a more general perspective. Bearing in mind the unique relationship between writer and recipient provided from letters, which promotes dialogical conversation particularly, a letter based writing design, developed by the author, will be introduced theoretically and didactically (2). Alongside an empirical analysis of a selected letter series, written by the social work students Britt and Dagmar, it will be shown how letters were used in social work education (3). It will then be explored how dialogical communication occurs between social work students. This impression will be deepened by a quantitative analysis on the dialogical amount and distribution in the letters. This way we arrive at conclusions on the benefit of letter writing for social work students to become professionals (4).

### **1. The Letter – A Provoker of Student’s Development?**

There are indications that the letter as a provoker of learning and educational processes has a long tradition in school education (see Rombach in *Lexicon der Pädagogik*, 1964; Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000; Höflich, 2002), but in the context of higher education it has been appreciated only in theory. As far as letter writing as part of academic studies is mentioned at all, letters are assessed as clearly advantageous for students (Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000; Linse, 1997; Frye, 1989; Fulwiler, 1997; Landis-Groom, 1992; Ochse, 1997; Sax, 2008; Taylor, 1992). Thus, letters should be given the same attention as diaries. Writing letters is the most natural and easiest form of writing (Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000: vii) and also definitely helpful for appropriating seminar content. They promote writing and learning processes to produce learning groups

and support literacy in general (Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000: vii). Letters have proven to be mediators between known and unknown knowledge as well as helping students develop their academic voices and identities (Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000: x). Letters encourage students, according to Dinitz and Fulwiler (2000: ix), to see learning not only as a carrying over from lecturer to student, but first and foremost as a transformative process. This holds true as letters are explicitly invitations to start and continue conversations with others, to share and explain thoughts (Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000: ix; Sax, 2008: 9). This begs the question in how far this comprehensive plea for letters as a self evident aspect in the acquisition of academic knowledge in academic everyday life will stand challenged by theoretical points of view.

How can a letter for example support students in presenting academic themes coherently, just by virtue of a clearly defined purpose and unambiguous reference to a recipient and therefore clarify what a student is able or yet unable to say about something?

Indeed a letter generally is characterized by a unique relationship between author and recipient (Simmel, 2009: 342) which constitutes its dialogic form as basic quality (Kloepfer, 1981: 319; Nicksisch, 1991: 229). The form of expression in a letter means, according to Simmel (2009: 342), first objectifying content, i.e. objectifying the subjective. However, this objectified content is in a letter directed to a single individual only.<sup>6</sup> It is to this recipient the writer turns to with his or her complete personality and subjectivity. The relationship between writer and the recipient of a letter constitutes something unique (Simmel, 2009: 342): when writing a letter the recipient is in a way directly present for the writer, so that both parties of the correspondence give the other more than the mere content of his or her words. Via the special relationship between writer and recipient of a letter as stated in the sociological argument, we can not only establish a theoretical foundation for the thesis in favour of letters from a pedagogic point of view as being helpful for students in presenting subject matter coherently, but we can also differentiate it. In order to use the potential given by the form and character of a letter in



principal, and to be able to focus on the logical, factual content thus ascertaining what one knows or doesn't know, explicit objectivity and differentiation in writing is required. To write letters thus becomes a demanding and complex task. This insight however contradicts the writing research assumption that letter writing is the most natural and easiest form of writing (Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000: vii). Letter writing is always unambiguously an asset to students and their acquisition of knowledge, if and in so far as the characteristics, which constitute a letter's phenomenon from a sociological point of view, are really borne out. This central argument was the result of the analysis of 1890 individual letters, primarily derived from social work courses that will be analysed step by step along with the empirical analysis (see chapter three).

One feature is for example a concrete relationship of exchange between the writer and the recipient, shaped by its dialogical character. This insight does not require for an actual letter exchange between students or between one student and a friend or family member of his/ her own choice. Letters only provide a dialogical addition to conversation if the chosen recipient is a real person and someone students really enjoy corresponding with. Only from this, students may draw upon the specific advantage of a letter, which results in taking over and dealing with the correspondents' perspective. Because everything '...that is by its nature clear in human expressions, is clearer in a letter as in speech' (Simmel, 2009: 343). In order to understand this mechanism and its benefit for dealing with multi-professional contexts in social work, the next chapter discusses the dialogical quality as letters basic theoretical markers (Kloepfer, 1981: 319; Nikisch, 1991: 229) and introduces a letter based writing design that was developed by the author in 2009 and is now used by several German universities.

## **2. Letter Writing and Becoming a Professional in Social Work**

It has been stated above that social work realized the epistemic potential of writing very early on in its emergence as a profession (Dias et al., 1999: 125). This is linked to the fact that writing promotes thinking. The immediate and

mutual relationship of writing and thinking provokes the production of knowledge and thus contributes to a professional attitude. To learn a 'foreign language' without giving up one's own (Kloepfer, 1981: 318) seems to be a core element of professional behaviour in social work as a multi-professional field.

But why using letters, one of the least common writing assignments in the academic world, to provoke dialogic thinking and acting? Letters are – as explored earlier – characterized by a unique relationship between writer and recipient (Simmel, 2009: 342) and having the dialogical quality as its basic marker (Kloepfer, 1981: 319; Nikisch, 1991: 229).

Though letters are explicitly invitations to start and continue conversations with others, to share and explain thoughts (Dinitz, Fulwiler, 2000, ix; Sax, 2008: 9), this structural edge can only be exploited by the development of a true relationship between the corresponding partners. According to Mead (1965: 52), we only gain new knowledge -for example obtaining self-reflective insight- through 'a meeting of minds', which happens during conversations when learning, reading and thinking; this is often linked to problematic situations.

Only when a discrepancy occurs, do we have to find out what symbols mean.<sup>7</sup> It is only now that knowledge as discovery truly happens, because we have to find out what the other person is referring to or means.<sup>8</sup> That kind of taking over perspectives from others, which often differ from our own is – from a theoretical point of view – defined as dialogue (Kloepfer, 1982; Mead, 1965). True dialogues – understood as the mutual adaptation of attitudes of the other as the consciousness of what we are doing and of what the other is doing – therefore offer the potential for specific relationship-based social work. To be more precise, we can speak of dialogue as a precondition for any kind of social change process. Though dialogue is not bound to any specific text form, letters do have an advantage compared to other text forms because of its addressed form, which facilitates dialogical conversation better than e.g. portfolios (see above).

This impact, which letter writing excerpts on thinking, is provoked systematically by our letter based research design, which is committed



to the paradigm of research-informed teaching (Bennett, 2007).<sup>9</sup> Our writing assignment is based on the idea that learning is a process and an experience (Dewey, 1958; Schutz, 2011: 136–170) and defines knowledge<sup>10</sup> as an insight into a sense of discovery (Mead, 1965: 92).

In addition we assume that human thinking happens in processes or, quoting Dewey (1958: 37) ‘thinking goes on in trains of ideas’. ‘However, ideas form trains only because they represent so much more than what analytical psychology calls a thought’ (Dewey, 1958: 37).<sup>11</sup> That is why our writing assignments generate a series of students’ letters and not separate ones. With reference to Schutz (2011: 145), the dimension of time in the acquisition of knowledge is a central one, since knowledge acquisition is always bound to a situation and also limited by it.

That means that the acquisition of knowledge is always contextualized. The usual context we find in academic teaching is, from an institutional perspective, the seminar, and this situation is now being artificially expanded by the writing assignment (Bromberg, 2011; 2012b) and – this is crucial – made didactical by a division into sections: preparing the seminar, the seminar itself, and writing a letter within 1.5 days after the seminar. How this process of thinking divided into separate sections along the lines of a seminar is experienced (or only lived through) by students or if the situation is understood as one of a knowledge or an acquisition at all, is documented by the students in their letters once a week. They are asked to present their view on the seminars content and text books as well as possible problems and insights to address their reflections to a person of their choice.<sup>12</sup> They are also advised to consider:

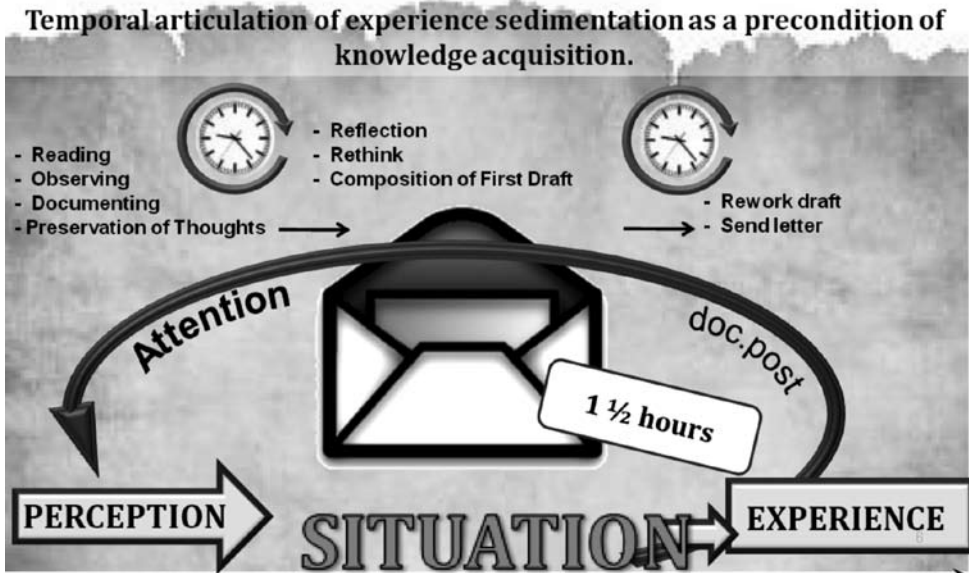
- What did I expect from the subject beforehand and how did the actual reading and discussion meet with my expectations?
- Which questions I wanted to be asked were, and what answers, if any, have I discovered?
- Which questions have remained unanswered?
- Could I connect new contents with those already known to me?

In addition, they are given an exemplary

letter written by a step-ahead student of social work.<sup>13</sup> The aim of the writing task is to motivate students to temporally articulate their experience of teaching-learning contexts and to address their thoughts and questions to their correspondent partner in a true dialogical manner. It provokes effects on two levels: students are methodically and systematically motivated to ‘produce their thoughts’ in a dialogical way, while the process of knowledge acquisition is divided into temporal entities. At the same time, the chosen research design maximizes the probability that the letters reveal processes of knowledge acquisition as they happen in institutional contexts, but they went so far unnoticed by observation and reconstruction. Now they are actually being documented. Furthermore, this design is based on the theoretical assumption that thinking and acting form an entity. This assumption implies that our experience, and not an ‘objective’ fact, is decisive for our definition of a situation. That means that what we live through only becomes an experience if we believe it to be sufficiently meaningful to give it attention. An experience as a current and conscious event does not necessarily carry actual meaning. The meaning of an experience and with it the insight attached to it will always appear only afterwards if we turn back to the situation in retrospect. It is exactly this moment what the employment of the writing assignment is all about; this point in time when knowledge becomes insightful. But it has to be captured as the process happens or, going back to Schutz (2011: 137–142), it has to be shown polythetically. This form of polythetic presentation of knowledge acquisition is methodologically and didactically supported by the dialogical form of letters and connected with it writing once a week to a specific recipient. Going back to the temporal structuring of knowledge acquisition, the described letter based procedure can depict as follows.



Figure 1: Acquisition of knowledge as a biographically articulated experience



In order to share what students read, heard or discussed with their communication partner, they have to do this in a process-related manner. Thus social work students are systematically challenged to look at their letter content from the perspective of their correspondence partner. Otherwise they risk ‘losing’ the true meaning of the letter.<sup>14</sup> This is the key element of exploiting the taking over and the dealing with perspectives, which often differ from our own. From the point of view of social work students, to get familiar with, initiating and keeping up with dialogues, is a precondition for communication. .But in addition with respect to their prospective profession, the dialogical way of thinking and acting leads far more to social change than sticking to one’s own point of view does. Now, let us have a closer look on the ways letter writing is used by social work students to get professionalized through analyzing selected series of letters.

**3. How do the Social Work Students Make Use of Letter Writing?**

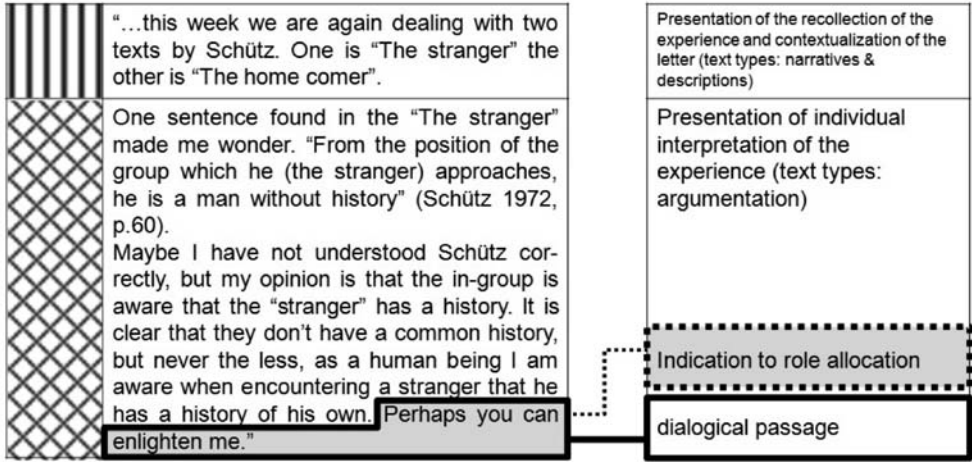
In order to get an impression of how dialogues in letters are created by social work students, and which insights it could lead to, we are going to analyze a letter exchange of two social work students about a course both were taking

part in. This social work course is entitled “Lebenswelt and Social Work”, and is offered only to Master students. It takes into account the concept of “Lebenswelt” as being the most prominent and important approach in the German social work debate (see e.g. Stein, Lindau-Bank 2014; Neumann, Sandermann 2012; Thiersch et al., 2012). This concept is by far the most influential perspective in German social work and connected with the term “theory” (see Dollinger et al., 2012). The course aims for competence in observing, analyzing and describing the everyday life of social work clients, e. g. homeless or unemployed people, in its social, spatial and temporal dimensions. Therefore, first social work students read and discuss phenomenological theory through letters before studying selections. “Lebenswelten”.

In order to clear up the relevance of letter writing empirically in becoming a social work professional, it is interesting to see how students address each other and how “a meetings of minds” as dialogue empirically happens between them. Dagmar’s excerpt is characterized by a detailed understanding of seminar literature, resulting in a discrepancy and ending with a question related to it, which she puts to her correspondence partner.



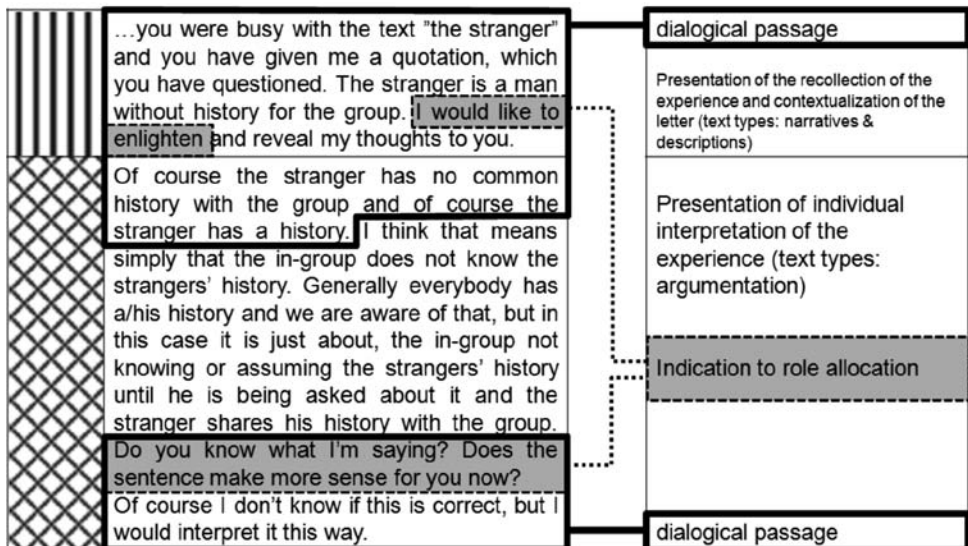
### Example 1: 'Dagmar to Britt (letter 8)'



In her responding letter, Britt addresses the question put to her and in doing so, picks up on Dagmar's phrasing partly at verbatim. Aside from the characteristic formal structure, we see that Britt explains her thoughts in detail on the text passage in question, while offering

a tentative deduction as well. The segment closes with a question with which Britt wants to make sure that she will learn from the responding letter if her explanation has proven to be helpful for Dagmar.

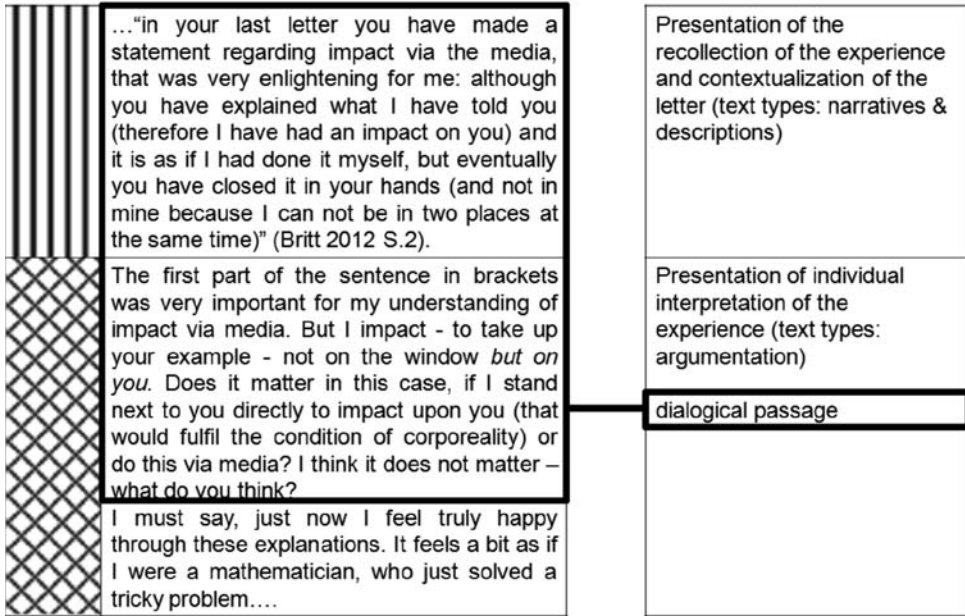
### Example 2: 'Britt to Dagmar'







Example 3: 'Dagmar to Britt'



The next passage is taken again from one of Dagmar’s letters as their exchange continues, and which gives an impression of how students struggle to arrive at their own conclusions and how they communicate their insights, gained with considerable effort.

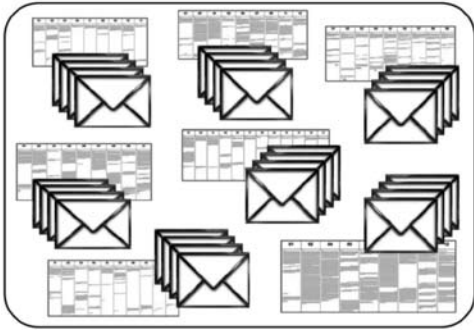
This example is impressive not only because of its explicit reference to the subject matter (seminar literature) but first also because of how the reference to Britt proves relevant for eventually reaching an insight. With this letter exchange we get an impression of how the quality with which addressing one another is necessary in order to create a dialogue between social work students. Actually, even master students rarely achieve this level of dialogical communication. How can we explain this empirical observation? In order to improve the dialogical quality of students’ letters, it seems physically to be helpful to send the letters as it was done in the given example. Even more the previous analysis all in all indicates that the level of dialogical activity of one correspondent partner becomes a precondition for the knowledge acquisition of the other. Thus in most cases a true letter exchange seems to be

helpful for social work students to communicate dialogically and thus to gain new knowledge in the sense of a discovery. But what have we learned from examining students’ letters empirically with regard to distribution and the amount of dialogic activities (on sampling see Becker, 1998; Bromberg, 2012a; detailed Schittenhelm, 2009)? Here we identified two basic types<sup>15</sup>: Type A is characterized by concentrating dialogical passages mainly on the greeting formulas at the beginning and the closing of the letters and – digressing from this pattern – type B, which is marked by a more even distribution of dialogical activity.

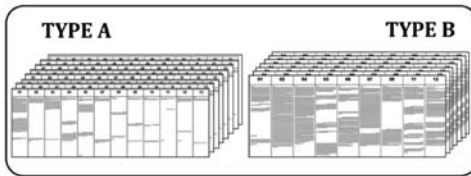




**Figure 2a: Sampling**



**Figure 2b: Ideal types of dialogical activities**



**Example 4: 'Britt to Dagmar' (letter series)**

words: 7060  
words in dialogical passages: 4949 (= 70.10%)

In a second step of data analysis, we clarified which markers are tied to which type, in what way they are similar and how they differ. The first comparative strategies pointed out that type A shows a significantly higher frequency of so called 'one sided dialogues' (Nickisch, 1991: 21), while the mutual dialogues characterize type B almost completely. So type B is much more similar to the nature of letters in their actual use than type A. However, a few one-sided dialogues could also be found in type B. Our assumption given above that the dialogical quality and distribution of students' letters can be improved by sending them off is now empirically proved.

The letter exchange of the two social work master students, Britt and Dagmar<sup>16</sup> will again serve as an example for depicting the amount of dialogical passages. Initially the letter series of the exchange are contrasted regarding distribution and the amount of their dialogical activities.

Both letter series - due to the distribution of their dialogical activities - have to be categorized as type B, but in direct comparison they do show differences. In relation to the overall extent of the letter, dialogical passages in Britt's series account for 39% to 100%, while Dagmar's form only between 20% and 69%.

**Figure 3(a): Letter series 'Britt to Dagmar'**

01	02	04	05	06	07	08	11	12
292/741	753/753	717/717	417/891	530/772	724/783	441/838	493/884	582/681
39,41%	100%	100%	46,80%	68,65%	92,46%	52,63%	55,77%	85,46%



**Example 5: ‘Dagmar to Britt’ (letter series)**

words: 6240  
 words in dialogical passages: 3098  
 (= 49.65%)

**Figure 3(b): Letter series ‘Dagmar to Britt’**

01	02	04	05	06	07	08	11	12
159/696	495/721	485/738	133/668	379/723	435/725	315/591	392/664	305/714
22,84%	68,65%	65,72%	19,91%	52,42%	60,00%	53,30%	59,04%	42,72%

**Example 6: ‘Jenny to David’**

“Concluding I would like to share a thought with you, especially with regard to your firm.

Before reading the text by Hanses, there was one thing I was not aware of: “nevertheless organisation theories explicitly point out, that crucial processes in institutions can not be clarified by the formal way things are run and rationalities, rather they are determined by organisational cultures” (see Hiller 2005; Hanses 2008c in Hanses 2010 P.121)

I believe what he is saying is that for success - for example your firm - not only your competence in leadership is decisive, but rather the corporate philosophy has a part in success or failure. The performance of the staff members is strongly moulded by their personal biographical experiences, “constructions of sense” (Hanses 2010 p. 122). Therefore they have to be perceived accordingly as social agents acting socially by the company’s management, and who are naturally impacted by social changes. So your acceptance and your understanding which you bring to your staff with their abilities and biographies are decisive.

Just think about it.”





If we compare the lowest level of dialogical passages of all type A-letters with those of type B-letters, we see an average of 12% versus 25%. If we compare the highest level of dialogical passages of types A and B we are looking at an average ratio of 53% and 75%. Therefore the lowest and the highest level of dialogical passages of type A-letters remains significantly under that of type B-letters. The following fictional exchange of letters between Jenny and David, categorized by ideal type A, documents references to the subject matter as such (seminar literature) but also to the recipient of the letters. This recipient, David, is real, yet he does not answer Jenny's letters.






The passage starts with a framing sentence that is supposed to serve as an orientation of what is to follow. Subsequently Jenny explains that by reading this text something has become clear to her, which she did not know before. With direct reference to the text, which she initially quotes verbatim and then discusses comprehensively, Jenny's acquisition of academic knowledge remains within the horizon of accepting and assimilating. The exemplary comparison therefore clearly shows differences with regard to quality levels in knowledge acquisition between the exchange of letters 'Britt and Dagmar' and the letter series 'Jenny to David', even if the effort to write dialogically is clearly recognizable.

Looking at Jenny's demand regarding David, to 'just think about' what she writes, this indi-

cation according to Dewey (1958: 35) can be interpreted as a temporary discontinuation of reflections, stemming from a widely spread tendency, of frequently not thinking matters through to the very end. With regard to this, real dialogues, as presented in the example of the exchange between Britt and Dagmar put the correspondents on the spot much more effectively. That is why a deducted conclusion reached by way of argumentation, as recognizable in the example of Britt and Dagmar's letters, cannot be detected in Jenny's letters to David.

Besides the differences with respect to the distribution and amount of dialogical quality in students' letters described above, there are some constitutive similarities. For example, the analysis of presentation activities (Schütze, 2008) in the data material shows that students' letters appear to have typical structures. While the beginning and the end of the letters are dominated by dialogic activities, we find narratives and descriptions as well as arguments in middle parts. Although the quality of the presentation activities in the students' letters varies considerably, the typical structure of a letter, as shown in the following figure, could be identified in all the series of letters we have examined so far. From a formal-structural perspective, the typical sequence of presentational activities can be depicted as follows.

**Figure 4: Diagram for the formal-structural Description of Students Letters**

1		Establishment of a suitable base for the following interaction.
2		Presentation of a structural and content framework for the following description.
3		Presentation of the recollection of the experience and contextualization of the letter (text types: narratives & descriptions).
4		Presentation of individual interpretation of the experience (text types: argumentation).
5		Establishment of a suitable base for conclusion and future interaction.



The procedure of our writing assignment claims the ability of depicting and reconstructing knowledge acquisition processes methodologically, as they happen in academic everyday life, but which usually remain hidden. Based on the empirical findings explored earlier, we eventually come to conclusions regarding the connection between letter writing, picking up and dealing with different perspectives through dialogical communication and becoming a professional in social work.

#### 4. Summary

The comparative analysis pointed out that the way in which the letter writer refers to the letter recipient, and has a substantial impact to the dialogical quality of the letter and thus if and how the correspondent's perspective is really carried over and is dealt with.

The relevance of this empirical finding for social work is rooted in the significance of taking over perspectives from others, when trying to succeed with case related social work in multi-professional teams. In order to fit social work working places, students have to develop dialogical ways of understanding and attitude. Those abilities to understand, catch and intermediate with different perspectives from varying professions involved in the same case, like medicine, law and psychology are necessary to deal with clients of social work successfully. Through theoretical discussion, it has been shown that especially the addressed writing provided from letters serve as thinking and writing from another point of view than our own. Using letter writing, social workers furthermore create self-reflection, which is a core feature of professionalism. Even though the dialogical does not come automatically with writing letters, a letter – due to its dialogical form – promotes processes of thought and insight in a special way. In this respect a letter – compared with other types of texts to which the dialogical could be linked – seems superior. Exploiting letters for students' knowledge acquisition and professionalization requires a definite recipient, and a writer with the ability to write dialogically with rich content. Letters may seem the easiest form of writing when taken at face value, but upon closer scrutiny it turns out to be a demanding affair, centred on

producing and nourishing a dialogue between writer and recipient. Though we still do not know why Mary E. Richmond prefers letter writing in professional processes, we might have some insight into what she may have meant. Watching everyday life from a biographical point of view, taking over a client's perspectives as a heuristic view to provoke social change and improvement were at the heart of her scientific thought. But acquisition of knowledge and improving professional habits in social work is also in a letter first and foremost tied to a dialogical activity between correspondent partners. The quality level and the seriousness of the effort to produce and nourish a dialogue between writer and recipient therefore proves to be indicators of the quality of the relationship between writer and recipient and by the same token as substantial conditions for the acquisition of knowledge. Thus it should be noted that advantages connected with the dialogical form of letters can only be exploited if a sufficient social relationship to the recipient does indeed exist, or even better if the letters are actually sent. This is why the characteristics of a letter as described by sociology and literary studies must also be understood as conditions for the acquisition of knowledge and professionalism in and with letters in academic everyday life.

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- 3 I am grateful to Heidrun Schulze for pointing me to the use resulting from letter writing in the field of narrative therapy.
- 4 See also Riemann 2004 for other ways to create self-reflection in the field of Social Work.
- 5 See White/Epston 1990, who use personal letters to (potential) clients, e.g. as invitation or discharge letters.
- 6 On the meaning of the letters' recipient and the anticipated and imagined reception and reaction connected with him or her as well as the impact on style, content, form, length of the individual letter and the quantitative extent (for follow up letters see Nickisch, 1991: 231; 243, on the meaning of the recipient, as well as what is being addressed in any kind of writing see Lillis, 2003: 198. On relevance of 'non actual' letter reception see Nickisch, 1991: 201.
- 7 On learning as a discrepancy action see Holzkamps (1995: 175–205) explanations on expansive and defensive learning.
- 8 Insight deliberately aims at the formation of hypothetical objects, examining their reality by observation and experiment. Even if a scientist negates everything, except his or her own thinking and ego, the fact remains that he or she has thoughts, resting entirely on preserving his or her former habit to speak with others and also with him or herself. The social nature of consciousness and ego brings about the same immediacy in our own experience, as it can attach itself to the experience of others (for more detail see Mead, 1965: 45–61).
- 9 Research-informed teaching, where teaching draws upon systematic enquiry into teaching and learning process itself (Bennett, 2007).
- 10 Schutz (2011: 136f.) defines knowledge as a stock of knowledge that has its history and could be interpreted as a sedimentation of previous experiences. Knowledge does not mean only 'explicit,

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- 2 See Carter, 2007; on the various formats of writing research, like emails, journals, letters see Gardner and Fulwiler 1999: vi–vii; on the restricted approach of academic writing research in the UK focussing on essays only see Ganobscik-Williams, 2004; Lillis, 2003, on writing for a successful academic qualification see



clarified, well-formulated insights, but also all forms of opinion and acceptance relating to a state of affairs as taken for granted.’

- 11 On the question of retraining see Ricken et al., 2009.
- 12 So far the range of recipients includes mostly family members and friends, but also clients and instructors. Only very few letter series were addressed to fictional recipients.
- 13 See also Sax, 2008. She uses letters in teaching narrative therapy as an aspect of narrative practice.
- 14 By the same token, letters develop a quality of ‘putting the writer on the spot’ as forcing him or her to go into details and come up with conclusions, as they have been worked out by narration theory and developed to an approach by narration analysis (Schütze, 2008).
- 15 The formation of ideal types goes back to Max Weber (see in detail on the formation of ideal types Gerhardt, 1998: 193–212).
- 16 Britt and Dagmar were enrolled in a master course for social work at an East German University for Applied Sciences.



# Research Accounts of Female Drug Use and their Implications for Social Work

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## Abstract

Based on a critical review of social science research into female drug use, the author identifies a tendency to lay particular emphasis upon two roles: that of structural constraints or that of individual agencies. This dichotomous perception portrays women drug users as either powerless victims of oppression, or as volitional agents unrestricted by structural limitations. The author explores the implications of such specialised discourse upon social work practice and how it may contribute to further stigmatization and disempowerment of female drug users. Using intersectionalism and broad definitions of agency and social structure, the article suggests a basis for empowering social work practice.

## Keywords

agency, drug use, empowerment, gender, intersectionality



## Introduction

In the course of critical reading and analysis of the theories concerning female drug users, researchers, social or health practitioners may recognise a tendency to lay undue emphasis upon two formative factors: either the role of structural constraints or the role of individual agents. As has already been observed by certain authors (mainly criminologists and sociologists, e.g. Anderson, 2008; Denton, 2001; Maher, 1997; Sandberg 2009; Sandberg, Grundetjern, 2012), such a dichotomous perception often portrays female drug users as either rather powerless victims of oppression, or as volitional agents unrestricted by structural limitations. This view not only fails to provide a complete picture of the life situations surrounding female drug users, but may also contribute to further stigmatisation and disempowerment of these women.

The aim of this paper is to reflect critically on this dichotomous tendency in social science research discourse and discuss its possible implications for social workers and other professionals who work with drug users (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists). The first part of the paper is based on a review of the literature, particularly that which addresses female users of illegal drugs and further contains a reflection of my experience as a social worker in a harm-reduction programme for drug users in the Czech Republic. In the second part of the paper, I suggest a theoretical framework contained within an interaction between social structures and individuals, rather than the attribution of a predominant role to either one. This enables an understanding of the life situations of female drug users in a broader context and precludes any further contribution to a view that is both dichotomous and stigmatising. The paper concludes with suggestions as to how this framework may create a basis for empowering social work in practice.

For the purposes of this paper, the female drug users I focus on are particularly 'problematic drug users' defined by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions as injecting drug users or long-term/regular users of opioids, cocaine and/or amphetamines.

## Structural Constraints

Female drug users have been a focus of substance abuse research for several decades. Much has been written of female drug users' specific situations, particularly with regard to their unequal gender position, higher stigmatisation or more difficult access to treatment and/or social services (e.g. Carter, 1997, 2002; Ettorre, 1992, 2007; Inciardi, Lockwood, Pottieger, 1993; Stocco, 2000, 2002). Such strong emphasis on the structural level is illustrative of a critique of the positivist medical discourse that has dominated drug research and policy well into the historical past. Contrary to the medical approach, maintained especially by psychiatrists and the 'disease model of addiction', the structural approach describes drug use as a social problem rather than an individual failing. The focus is on the political, cultural and economic contexts of drug use. Gender is understood as a crucial characteristic of social organization, and thus female drug use is directly linked to women's position in society. For instance, Ettorre (1992) maintains that it is important to recognise that women are socialised into dependency more easily and more often than men. She argues that, for women, 'dependency' stands not only for 'addiction', but also for 'subordination'. Having a 'dependency as addiction' is socially unacceptable, especially when it interferes with women's stereotypical social roles, such as housewife, worker, mother, daughter, or girlfriend; but, 'dependency as subordination' aligns with social norms, and can even be a desirable state for women to assume as a core form of identity. Furthermore, since 'carer' is a common role assigned to the woman since other people are also dependent on her (e.g. children, the elderly, a partner), a complex system of dependency is created, not only in the public sphere but within private life as well (Stocco, 2000, 2002).

The structural inequality arising out of gendered relations is further exacerbated by the double standards that exist for men and women. Various authors point out that, because drug use in many ways contradicts what is seen as the social ideal of feminine behaviour, negative moral judgements and stereotypes are more likely to manifest themselves in the case of drug-using women than in the cases of



men (e.g. Ettore, 1992; Stocco, 2000, 2002; Vobořil, 2002). The negative stereotypes are especially associated with what may be seen as 'typical female domains' such as morals, sexuality and the ability to care for themselves and others (Ettore, 1992). If women do not fulfil expectations arising out of these roles they are often stigmatised far more severely than their male counterparts. These stereotypes generate even more punitive responses, both socially and legally, when women use drugs during pregnancy (Baker, Carson, 1999; Carter, 1997, 2002; Friedman, Alicea, 1995, 2001; Klee, 2002; Lewis, 2002; Young, 1994). Such negative stereotypes lead to women being described as aggressive and manipulative, acting without feelings and emotions or suppressing those feelings for the sake of obtaining drugs, or as being sexually promiscuous. In their personal life they are seen as lonely, unhappy, lacking self-confidence, or destructive. Their femininity is depicted as 'misplaced', 'rejected', or 'insufficient' (Carter, 1997, 2002; Ettore, 1992; Inciardi, Lockwood, Pottieger, 1993; Klee, 2002; Lalander, 2003; Lewis, 2002; Maher, 1997).

Although this overview of the issues that are dominant in social science research related to drug use is far from exhaustive, it lends insight into the structural context of female drug use. However crucial it may be to broaden the focus away from the solely individual to the social dimension, this still provides an incomplete view of life situations; it points out the structural restrictions but does not reflect their sources of support. There is a lack of discussion about what strategies the female drug user may employ to cope with problems.

### **Individual Agency**

Research accounts that concentrate on the structural dimensions of women's drug use have been criticised for not allowing sufficient space for the individual capacity to act. Thus, approaches that centre upon the role of an individual agency often include criticism that highlights the overestimation of the role of social structure. For example, doubt has been cast upon uncritical acceptance of direct linkages between childhood abuse or experiences with other forms of violence and involvement in

law-breaking and drug use. Criticism also has been directed at the linkages between female dependency on men and drug use, cast in the light of a highly stereotypical view of women's involvement in the drug world (Maher, 1997). Some authors suggest different, take a rather challenging opposing position, that female drug use may be interpreted as a form of resistance or rebellion to social pressure and stereotypical gender expectations (e.g. Friedman, Alicea, 1995, 2001; Baskin, Sommers, 2008). Contrary to claims that women are becoming drug users through relationships with men in particular, they propose women's use of illicit drugs as a possible indicator of rising gender equality. Scholars interpret drug use as a denial of the passive role and an adoption of a more independent and rebellious lifestyle (e.g. Measham, 2002).

From this viewpoint, the increasing participation of women in the drug economy and an increased association with violent behaviour has been described as a result of the increasing emancipation of women throughout society. However, this approach may also support the image of women drug users as the so-called 'new violent female criminals', or 'troublesome girls' (Jackson, Tinkler, 2007; Hudson, 2008; Maher, 1997; Worrall, 2008) and explain their behaviour in a context which, contrary to the previous "Seen as the victim" scenario, over-ends women with agency and free will not appropriate to actual structural conditions.

This shift of theoretical understanding, acknowledging individual capacities as paths to resistance to structural constraints, I see as very important, but not without its drawbacks. If the view of the female drug user is not placed in a broader social context, then it may contribute to perceptions of women as volitional agents unrestricted by structural limitations. To see agency as exercised only through active resistance does not provide a complete understanding of women's capacities to deal with the problems they encounter.

Researchers seeking to understand the exercise of agency have to address the difficult task of how to define women's drug use, and they must take in all the various and often paradoxical or contradictory ways in which agency can be expressed. For example, 'playing the victim role'



or allowing oneself to be placed into a powerless position may be seen, in some situations, as an important indicator of agency. For example, such positions may result in benefits when negotiating child custody or seeking clemency in court. On the other hand, involvement in important activities (e.g. drug dealing) does not automatically imply an exercise of agency. This issue has also been discussed in the context of women's involvement in sex work. For example Maher (1997), in her research into female drug users in Brooklyn, reports that in order to maintain a sense of dignity, self-respect and protection from exploitation, most of the women were able, to some extent, to define limits in relation to sexual conduct, discriminate among clients and between sex acts, and negotiate the price and the duration of the transaction. However, Maher (1997) also points out that this should not lead us to a false perception of agency in which any activity is seen as equality or presence as synonymous with participation (see also Inciardi, Lockwood, Pottieger, 1993). As Scheper-Hughes puts it: "Here we must be careful not to mistake existence for resistance and, in so doing, to romanticize human suffering." (1992: 533).

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

It follows from what has been discussed above that definitions of social structure, agency and their mutual relations can have a crucial impact on research outcomes. These research accounts inform the practice of the various professions who work with female drug users as clients (e.g. psychologists and social workers in the social services, treatment programmes or other forms of institutional help), through the university education system and other means of formal and informal education (e.g. professional journals, conferences, courses, training sessions, etc.). In following paragraphs I discuss how different standpoints on the role of social structure and individual agency may influence the practice of social workers and other professionals. This discussion is based on the reflection of my experience as a social worker in two harm-reduction programmes for drug users in the Czech Republic. As a social worker in these programs, I was in contact with workers from other services for drug users (e.g. treatment programs or drop-

in centres) as well as professionals from other institutions such as hospitals, probation service, employment office, etc.

Research accounts that lay stress upon the role of social structure as an oppressing force may translate in social work and other professions into approaches that do not recognize available structural resources (e.g. the role of various informal networks, etc.) and fail to support and encourage individual agency. Such over-emphasis may also be deterministic, focusing only on situations involving dysfunction, dependence, powerlessness, exploitation, and victimisation. In the context of social work, it may be assumed that clients who are perceived as victims may consequently appear to be more legitimate recipients of help than clients who are perceived as strong agents. Professional workers may therefore expect that their clients, too, may deliberately choose to identify with, or play, the victim role in order to gain better access to institutional help, social benefits or other resources. When it comes to issues such as drug dealing, involvement in sex work, or the use of violence, it may also be easier or more acceptable for social workers to interpret such issues as a result of social pressure rather than a deliberate choice on the part of the client.

Explaining drug use from the perspective of structural constraints may provide significant advantages for the people involved. For social workers, it may be a possible solution to dilemmas concerning legitimate and illegitimate recipients of help. For clients, the victim role may facilitate better access to institutional help. However, this approach may still contribute to further stigmatisation of drug users since it fails to empower them, blocking attempts to achieve equal positions within society, to become responsible and capable of taking control over their own lives.

On the other hand, research accounts emphasising the role of agency, expressed especially through active resistance to oppressive circumstances, can support the image of female drug users as a kind of 'villain', or rational agents seeking ways to maximise deviant or criminal opportunities and self-interest. In practice, this standpoint can contribute to the view of clients as 'addicts by choice' who use drugs for their own pleasure, without caring





about possible negative consequences for themselves and others. Thus structural context is often un-reflected or underestimated. Social workers and other professionals who perceive female drug users in the role of villains may denigrate or blame clients for being aggressive and inconsiderate to others, which is especially in the case of women seen as problematic or inappropriate behaviour. From this standpoint, women are not seen as legitimate recipients of help, and therefore institutional support might be withheld. As Anderson points out, Showing women's power and agency in illegal endeavours will diminish sympathy for assisting them in securing better lives. To their credit, 'powerlessness and pathology' frameworks have succeeded in elevating academic attention to women and in rising support and resources for them (2008: 3).

If agency is only seen as active resistance without understanding the broader context, social workers might also find themselves in a dilemma: how to support and engage with resistance, because such behaviour might be perceived as encouraging their clients in deviant or illegal behaviour (an example might be found in situation when social worker wants to support client's ability to finance housing, herself and her family, but does not agree with the illegal source of the money which might be gained for instance through drug dealing, prostitution or theft).

In the foregoing discussion I reflect on the impact that scientific accounts of female drug use can have for the practice of social work and other helping professions. I find particularly unsettling the risk of further stigmatization, which not only reinforces negative stereotypes and stigmatisation, but may also seriously restrict the benefits that female drug users might otherwise acquire from institutional help, or even prevent them from seeking such help. Consequently a paradoxical situation emerges, in which a group of clients with specific needs, such as pregnant women, is also the subgroup that most often drops out of contact with professionals.

As with anyone, the life situation of the female drug user includes a whole spectrum of relations, experiences and desires. However to avoid perceiving women's involvement in the illicit

drug world as a powerless one or a pathological situation, a framework is needed that will enable understanding of the female drug users' life situations through interactions between social service structures and the individual.

### **Interaction between Agency and Social Structure**

As mentioned above, the limited view of structure as mainly restrictive and agency as exercised only through active resistance towards oppression contributes to a dichotomous view of the situation. To avoid this shortcoming, I will now explore how the definitions of structure and agency can be broadened.

#### *Agency*

A number of authors agree that agency can be defined as the individual, socio-culturally-mediated capacity to act; that is used to overcome the structural constraints that operate upon social action (e.g. Ahearn, 2001; Giddens, 1984; McNay, 2004). However, it is important to understand structural conditions not only in terms of oppression, but also as a potentially enabling source of support; agency also needs to be defined as the capacity to act in order to benefit self and others (Anderson, 2008). Agency is thus seen as exercised not only in situations in which individuals encounter structural constraints (are acting 'against') but also in cases in which female drug users use structural resources to their own benefit. The capacity to act includes the ability to intervene, as well as any decision to refrain from intervention. Therefore agency can be present in action, as well as in any choice for 'non-acting'.

However, it must be borne in mind that an important precondition for the exercise of agency is what Giddens terms the 'ability to act differently'. This means that the individual "could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened." (1984: 9). This definition precludes too narrow a view of agency, common for example in some feminist theory (Ahearn, 2001; Frank, 2006), that sees agency as exercised only through active resistance to oppression.



Agency also cannot be seen in dichotomous terms as something that one has or does not have, but rather to the degree to which a person is able to determine the course of his/her social action (compare with power as defined, for example, by Anderson, 2008, or Dominelli, 2002). Therefore the presence of oppression does not mean a total absence of agency, but also the exercise of agency does not mean the absence of oppression. As Mahoney (1994) puts it, one is not defined by the absence of the other. Mahoney (1994) also elucidates this view through the example of domestic violence, where staying in the relationship with the perpetrator is seen as identical with victimisation and continuing oppression, contrary to leaving, which is seen as the right solution and an expression of agency. Ability to leave becomes something as a test of agency. But such a view does not take into account the resistance to violence and oppression which may be expressed also in continuing the relationship (seemingly 'non-acting'). Agency may well be reflected in efforts to find a solution and address the problems, not merely in fulfilling social expectation to leave.

Definitions of agency that include not only acting against constraints but also the ability to employ structural resources to one's benefit allows me to understand the seemingly paradoxical ways in which agency is exercised. For instance, situations in which people who are assumed to be negatively influenced by stigmatising discourse might act in ways that actually reproduce these negative stereotypes. This can be illustrated on the example of drug users emphasising their dependency in order to reach institutional help or benefits.

Furthermore, aligning agency with structure implicitly rejects the simplistic definition of agency that equates it with free will and rational choice. Agency is shaped by the individual as well as by social, cultural, spatial and historical contexts.

It follows that the definition of agency is not a static and fixed concept; the ways in which it is exercised in the life of the individuals cannot be defined as universal for all women. While it is also not possible to state that something is equally oppressing or empowering to entire homogenous groups, there remains an

acute need for scholars to contextualise the experiences of particular individuals or groups of people.

### *Social Structure and Intersectionality*

The concept of social structure refers to how people in society are "categorised according to social divisions such as class and gender" (Thompson, 2006: 21). These divisions consequently play an "important role in the distribution of power, status and opportunities" (Thompson, 2006: 21). It is crucial to the understanding of the dynamics of interaction between individual and structure; that structure is not only seen as restrictive, but that it also has supporting, enabling, and/or empowering potential. Therefore for example Giddens (1984) refers to structure as a set of rules and resources.

Also important is that structure restricts or enables people differentially (Sewell, 1992). Occupancy of various social positions characterized by gender, class, education, ethnicity, occupation, age, sexual orientation, and other categories of identification restrict or enable access to different resources and possibilities of action. Like agency, structure is not static, a fixed idea, and needs to be seen in the context of individual life experiences.

The various positions that people occupy within social structures can be grasped through the concept of intersectionality, which takes into account the multiple grounds of identity and the way in which they are constructed in the social world (Crenshaw, 1991). It stresses how "subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (Nash, 2008: 2) and other axes of social distinctions or dimensions of life situations. Using domestic violence as an example, Crenshaw (1991) demonstrates that it is necessary to reflect not only upon the gendered character of the problem, but also its intersection with other categories (e.g. race and class). For example, battered women of one ethnic background experience a situation in different ways than women who do not share the same ethnic backgrounds and therefore also the possibilities of help for these women may be very limited if different intersectional obstacles are not taken into account.



This approach enables an analysis of both the life situations of female drug users and a variety of structural characteristics, and thus prevents oversimplification and generalisation of gendered relations. While researching the situation of female drug users I consider it very important to take into account the intersection of class, ethnicity<sup>2</sup>, age and sexual orientation of female drug users, but the list of characteristics may be intrinsically unlimited and is always dependent on individualised context and situations. Also, the categories that play crucial roles cannot be taken for granted. In accordance with Crenshaw (1991), black women might be described as ‘multiple burdened’, but there is a risk of overestimating the negative impact of these categories while at the same time other important categories or influences, such as sexuality, age, or individual dispositions, which in a particular situation play more important roles, may be overlooked. Or as Staunæs and Søndergaard explain: “in empirical contexts there actually are situations where a sociocultural category like gender is surpassed by other categories, for example ethnicity. ‘Surpassed’ does not mean that ‘gender’ doesn’t mean anything at all, but it means that other categories might be more pivotal.” (Staunæs and Søndergaard 2011: 51).

Furthermore, the intersection of social categories not only reinforces disadvantages or oppression, but may also destabilize or neutralize their influence or reinforce the structural sources of support (Staunæs, 2003; Staunæs, Søndergaard, 2011; Lykke, 2010). Staunæs (2003) argues that it is important to understand that categories such as ethnicity or gender are not special minority issues. Powerful, privileged people are part of the gender or class structures as well. Who occupies the majority/minority, non/privileged, non/powerful position is not fixed, but varies and changes in space and time. However restrictive the conditions might be, the position is negotiated in interaction.

### ***Interaction***

In order to avoid the dichotomous perception of the life situation of female drug users, in which they are depicted as rather powerless victims of structural oppressions or as volitional agents, I have argued that a broadened

definition of social structure and agency must be used, and an approach developed that will facilitate understanding of their interaction. I have defined agency as the capacity to act that is used to overcome structural constraints, but also as the capacity to use structural resources and support for the subjects’ benefit. Social structure is not only restricting and oppressing but also enabling and empowering. Thus agency and structural conditions are inseparably bound together and in constant interaction. The exercise of agency is shaped, and therefore shapes social structure, and vice versa.

Furthermore, the concept of intersectionality enables analysis of the intersection of the various social categories in order to understand their influence, whether individuals occupy dis/advantaged, non/privileged, majority/minority positions and how this alters in the life situations of a range of people and in their different situations.

### **Towards Empowering Social Work**

The framework suggested here has practical implications for social work. The broadened definitions of agency and structure, together with attention paid to their mutual interaction, may lead the social worker to ask questions such as: ‘Who are the important people and institutions with whom the female drug users interact?’, ‘How do these people and institutions work as sources of constraint and/or support?’, ‘What role does the intersection of categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, education, sexual orientation etc. play in these interactions?’, ‘How do these categories work to the female drug user’s advantage and disadvantage in different situations?’.

Asking these questions helps the social worker gain a deeper understanding of the life situation of the female drug user and to avoid the dichotomous view, where the client is either a powerless victim or volitional agent. It leads us to pay attention to the conditions that the clients themselves define as oppressive or supportive and also to various ways in which agency is exercised (e.g. resistance, conformity). Last but not least, it helps the social worker understand the benefits that female drug users obtain from the illicit drug world, also crucial



to a comprehensive view of their life situation (Svensson, 2000, 2006).

Observing the life situation of the female drug user through the web of structural and individual characteristics, strategies and relations creates a sound basis for empowering social work. According to Adams, empowerment is defined as the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work towards helping themselves and others to maximise the quality of their lives (1996: 5).

This definition indicates how closely empowerment is related to the concept of agency and its practice. However, as is evident from the above, agency is inseparably bound to structural conditions, and in constant interaction with them. The following recommendations for empowering social work practice therefore focuses on the individual as well as their environment. Also from the point of view of critical social work, empowering social work takes into account the individual as well as the social dimensions and sees them as equally important. Compared with other social work paradigms, critical social work places strong emphasis on social change and change of existing power relations (Healy, 2000; Fook, 1999, 2002; Payne, 2005). Therefore, in empowering social work practice, every client needs to be seen as a unique individual with specific needs and abilities; at the same time the broader context of their position in society has to be examined. In this way, the clients' capacities to negotiate and shape the world around them can be recognised and supported, and is not perceived through the binary oppositions of victim or agent, because these roles are not mutually exclusive, but create different aspects of the same experience or individual identity (Pollack, 2000).

In empowering social work practice, the shift of focus to an individual dimension does not mean involvement in the clients' needs alone, but also their agency. As has become clear, agency is exercised through coping strategies and fulfilling the expectations imposed by a person's environment, but significantly also through opposition or resistance to these expectations (e.g. gender norms) as well. In

order to recognise the clients' strengths and capacities, the social worker has to concentrate on socially acceptable coping strategies, but also behaviour that might go against social expectations. Otherwise drug using women, who often exercise agency in socially unacceptable ways, such as participating in the drug business, sex work, or other criminal behaviour, might appear rather powerless. Consequently the social worker might face the difficult dilemma of finding a way to support the clients' agency, but without implying consent or support for their involvement in, for instance, illegal activities. This is a complex issue that cannot be fully addressed in this paper. However, the crucial point is that, for the development of empowerment, recognition of client agency, expressed in all its different ways, is vital.

A further important condition for empowering social work is that it helps the people involved understand the structural and political context of their individual problems and recognize that they are not the only ones experiencing them (Carter, 2002; Thompson, 2006; young, 1994). This signifies the important notion that it is not only the client but also society that needs to change or adjust when problems occur.

One example of such a change may be found in a change of attitudes towards female drug users in wider society. Social workers can contribute to this change by, for instance, challenging negative stereotypes and problematising the concept of 'female drug use' itself. This means that, first of all, the social workers themselves have to "challenge their own assumptions and expectations of [...] what being female means." (Crinall, 1999: 80). Crinall reports that in her research on asylums for young homeless women, behaviour which deviated from feminine 'norms' incited negative and marginalising responses from workers and peers (Crinall 1993). Young women's domesticity and passivity were reinforced and rewarded, while physical strength, dominance and domestic uselessness were considered endearing and useful characteristics in young men. (1999: 79).

Crinall (1999) also warns that rigid adherence to any singular, prescribed or defined code for being a woman has the potential to be strongly oppressive. Therefore social workers, too, need



critically to reflect upon their own stereotypical assumptions (e.g. that every woman wants to be a mother) and support a variety of choices of gender identity.

By describing the life situation of drug using women in a wide variety of relations and roles and giving examples of individual cases, social workers may call into doubt the taken-for-granted, often stigmatising, assumptions about the 'typical female drug user', her 'typical problems' or her 'typical behaviour'.

### Conclusion

Based on a critical review of social science research into female drug use, I have identified the tendency to lay emphasis upon either the role of social structure and structural constraints or the role of individual agency. Although some explanation of this dichotomous perception may be found in historical attitudes to the introduction of a gender view into a field that was strongly dominated by positivist and medical discourse, this does not take away from the fact that it may still contribute to the further stigmatisation of women who use drugs. The dichotomous view, which tends to perceive female drug users as either powerless victims of oppression or volitional agents who are unrestricted by structural constraints, also has implications for social work and other professions that work with female drug users. To avoid further contributing to this stigmatising view, I have suggested theoretical frameworks which broaden the definition of social structure and agency and places strong emphasis on their mutual interaction. This approach enables a better understanding of the life situation of female drug users in a broader context than the simply pathological and also creates a sound basis for empowering social work practice.

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#### Notes

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- 2 In the context of Czech Republic I find it more appropriate to use the term ‘ethnicity’ rather than ‘race’. The direct equivalent to the English word ‘race’ in the Czech language is largely used in the sense of ‘breed’ (e.g. dog breed), and also has strong negative connotations with Nazism (Kolářová 2009). ‘Ethnicity’ is also a commonly-used term when referring to Romani people. Roma also constitute a substantial proportion of drug abusers in the Czech Republic, especially among those who indulge in opiates in the larger cities. Similarly, the category of ‘class’ can generate problems in the Czech environment as the term has strong negative associations with Communist ideology (Kolářová 2008). For these reasons it might be interesting to consider, for example, Bourdieu’s concept of economic, cultural and social capital as possibly more useful.



# The Participatory approach in low-threshold centres for children and youth<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

New methodologies in social work with underprivileged children and youth promote the participation of the service users and see the participatory approach as a powerful tool of empowerment. In this article the participatory approach is presented as a possible solution to the specific problems of social exclusion of youth in urban areas. The article discusses the empowering potential of the participatory approach. The research sections of this article is a case study of the application of the participatory approach in a low-threshold youth drop-in centre in one socially excluded neighbourhood. It highlights its contribution to addressing the specific life conditions of service users and brings new questions and areas for further discussion about the enhancement of services users' participation in social services that deal with children and youth.

## **Keywords**

the participatory approach, low-threshold youth drop-in centre, social exclusion of children and youth, empowerment



## Introduction

In the Czech Republic, social services intended for non-organised “street” children and youth, predominantly take the form of low-threshold drop-in centres for children and youth (NZDM). Their task is to provide an outlet for preventive actions in risk areas of the children’s and youth’s lives, primarily for those who receive no or insufficient support from their own families and a wider community, and who spend their leisure time exposed to various risks. The social service provided by NZDM is relatively specific due to its low threshold, which differentiates it from regular hobby groups, leisure-time and educational activities for children and youth which are usually provided by schools and other organisations. Although the children and youth are usually seen as “those who need to be looked after”, many NZDMs strive to involve their clients in the decision-making process, i.e. to adopt the so-called participatory approach. The purpose of this article is to explore a case of a specific drop-in centre to find out if and how social workers promote participation within the centre.

## Children and youth in socially excluded localities

This article is a case study of one specific NZDM which is located in an officially acknowledged socially excluded area. This area is situated in a larger city. There are about 9000 inhabitants living in this area which consists of 10 smaller neighbourhoods (according to data from 2010).<sup>3</sup> More than 80% of the local inhabitants belong to the Roma ethnic minority<sup>4</sup> (Sociofactor, 2011). The inhabitants of this area usually suffer from poverty, long-term unemployment, low or non-existent education and indebtedness. Socio-pathological behaviour mostly in the form of gambling and drug abuse is more widely spread here than in the other areas of the town.

Local inhabitants lack opportunities and the ability to attain the necessary resources that are needed to live an adequate life. It is not only a matter of financial deficiency (poverty) but also deficient social participation, a low level of integration into society and the feeling of helplessness which accompanies these deficiencies (Mareš 2006: 7). According to

Burchardt et al. (1999: 229) socially excluded people are those individuals and groups who are citizens/members of a given society but for reasons that are beyond their control cannot participate in common activities which they would be normally authorised or aspire to, on the basis of their citizenship. In places where social exclusion accumulates and transmits from one generation to the other, the so-called socially excluded localities, also known as “ghettos” emerge.

Social exclusion tends to be related to unemployment, though the very fact of being employed is no longer a guarantee of successful liberation from a miserable life situation. In addition, a typical reaction to an unfavourable market position is resignation and voluntary unemployment (Hora 2008: 19; Sirovátka 1997: 19, 109; Engbersen et al., 2006: 155). The poor educational level of the inhabitants of the socially excluded localities is connected to their uncertain position in the labour market - work carried out in the secondary market does not bring sufficient certainties, which in turn contributes to the fact that even employment and regular wages do not deliver sufficient security and certainty (Standing, 2011: 41). High rates of or voluntary unemployment also relate to the low incentives for placement into the secondary labour market, where the costs associated with such work outweighs its benefits (Wacquant, 2008: 237). According to experts<sup>5</sup> from the socially excluded area, the incentives of the locals to work for minimal wages in non-qualified jobs in the secondary labour market are very low (Sociofactor, 2011; Kašparová et al., 2008). Moreover this situation influences their children as well, which can be seen by their low aspirations in the labour market - their “dream jobs” - “car mechanic, hair-dresser, cook, welder, or shop-assistant” all belong to the secondary labour market.

The socially excluded area is perceived as a “dangerous place” and “a bad address” by the general public. This antipathy is partially caused by the negative images of Roma ethnic minority within the general public. According to Wacquant (2008: 239) the label “maladjusted,” which is increasingly applied to people living in ghettos, divides society. An acute feeling of social indignity related to living



“in a bad neighbourhood” may be blocked out by stigmatising an imaginary, demonised “others,” i.e. neighbours, immigrants, drug-addicted children.

According to Wacquant, life in socially excluded localities is also characterised by the decay of the area: loss of empathy, closed off cultural avenues, and increasing social diversity causing the local inhabitants to lose the feeling of “home” and safety. (Wacquant, 2008: 242). Sees ghettos more as a “naked space” that is no longer a shared resource which can be mobilised to protect its inhabitants and which could provide collective support. It has become a battlefield, a place for combat between the independent and organised street predators, the locals and their self-help groups, the public and government agencies focused on maintaining stability and social control, the containment of crime and violence (social workers, teachers, police officers, probation officers, patrols, etc.) and the external institutional predators (seeking the opportunities to gain buildings and plots of land in these localities, which might be sold subsequently to members of the middle class) (Wacquant, 2008: 242–243). This situation can be seen in the area where the case-studied NZDM is situated. On the in-side the Roma community is diverse and divided into small groups usually recognized by family-membership. Social services and local NGOs exist on the border between the informal life in the community and the formal municipality and state interests. Moreover a process of gentrification has taken place in the last years, changing not only the outer image of the area but also its inner structure. There is no notion of a wider community among the locals, especially not a community, which can participate on the public decision-making or self-government of the area.

Thus, children in a socially excluded environment grow up with a feeling of “rejection”, and “exclusion” from the majority. They see in their own parents the example of how conventional strategies for involvement in the labour market fail to supply a proper source of livelihood, or more specifically they learn alternative strategies of resignation or stagnation with a low level of ambition. This is coupled with an absence of ambition to achieve

a higher education, considering these goals as unrealistic and having a personal conviction that the current situation is unchangeable. Moreover, the relationships in the community where the children grow up may be disturbed as a result of decreased solidarity and cohesion. Consequences of these circumstances include, but are not limited to: A lack of ambition, a poor ability to plan for the future (both near and distant), low motivation and limited opportunities for personal development, a narrow view of the world outside the socially excluded locality, distrust of the “external” environment and people in this environment, deeply rooted consciousness of the stratification of society.

### **Low-threshold centres for children and youth as a part of social services**

Low-threshold centres for children and youth (hereinafter “NZDM”) are the form of social prevention service pursuant to Act No. 108/2006 Coll. By virtue of Section 62 of this Act, these centres provide ambulatory or field social services to children between 6 and 26 years of age who are exposed to socially adverse phenomena. The goal of this service is to improve the quality of children’s lives by preventing or reducing the social and health risks related to their way of living, to enable them to orient themselves in a social environment and to establish conditions for resolving their unfavourable social situation (ČR, 2006).

According to the Česká asociace streetwork (Czech Association of Streetwork, ČAS), which works as an umbrella organisation for NZDM in the Czech Republic, the mission of NZDM is “*to endeavour to reverse social inclusion and promote positive change in the way of life of children and youth who have found themselves in an unfavourable social situation, to provide information, professional assistance and support, thereby preventing their social exclusion.*” (ČAS, 2008)

According to ČAS, NZDM (1) provides support in dealing with difficult life situations and events; (2) reduces the social risks arising from the conflict within social situations, various ways of life, and risky behaviour; (3) improves social abilities and competence; (4)



supports social inclusion within a peer group and society, including involvement in the life of the local community; (5) provides the necessary psychological, physical, legal and social protection during a stay in the centre, as well as favourable conditions for implementation of personal improvements; (6) helps prevent or eliminate the risk associated with the way of life of these children and youth; (7) enables better orientation to a social environment; (9) establishes the conditions to handle unfavourable social situations. As implied by these characteristics, a relatively great stress is laid on the direct involvement of the service users in the social service's events (e.g. through organising the users' own activities, involvement within a peer group), but also through engagement in a broader sense of the word, e.g. involvement in the life of the local community).

The term "*low-threshold*" in the name of this service indicates that it is implemented so as to ensure its maximum accessibility. The process of providing the service eliminates the time, space, psychological and financial barriers which could prevent the target group from searching for the centre or from using the services offered (ČAS, 2008). For this reason, the low-threshold centres are located in "the very space-time", i.e. in the locality and day time of the highest concentration of the target group. The centres provide social services anonymously and free of charge, and they do not require their clients to drop in regularly, or to initiate the activities or to agree with the world views represented by the centres.

The specific area of work of NZDM is the target group of children and youth who - in spite of their infancy - have the status of "full-bodied" users with all rights and duties. The NZDM hopes to gain the trust and respect of users by allowing them to use their facilities anonymously.

The NZDM of this case study is a part of the network of social services and other initiatives that are supposed to assist inhabitants of the socially excluded area in improving their life-conditions. According to the experts, the area is well networked by social services (Sociofactor, 2011), concerning children and youth - there are altogether 6 NZDMs in the whole area.

### **Participatory approach in low-threshold centres for children and youth**

The participatory approach is based on the ideas of shared decision making, active citizenship, equality of social worker and service user and user's active participation in "using" the social services. Applying this approach in social services draws upon the idea that the involvement of the service users in the decision-making process supports the efficiency of the social services provided, and is in the direct interest of the user, and the social worker as well.

Understanding democratic participation and having the self-confidence and the competence to participate in these processes may be acquired only through practical experience, they cannot be learnt abstractedly (Hart, 1992). In the context of changes within society, it is possible to see changes in social work too. At present, the state is still less perceived to be responsible for its citizens and for the good of the community (MacDonald, 2006: 10). Yet, a new ideal "product" of social work is "an active citizen" (MacDonald, 2006: 22), who is able to stand up for his/her rights and solve his/her problems more or less independently. An inevitable part of "active citizenship" is the ability to actively decide on circumstances concerning the life of individuals, and subsequently to participate in the decision-making process where an individual no longer decides for themselves. Therefore, for social work to achieve this goal it seems necessary to find ways of supporting and improving the abilities of the "disadvantaged" in directly participating in decision making that could have positive or negative effects upon the users themselves. The support of greater participation in decision making by the "disadvantaged" 'themselves within the framework of social services, may lead to the acquisition of this competence even in other environments.

Participation, within the meaning of "co-involvement" in the decision-making process, means in fact sharing the power to make those decisions. Yet, the application of the participatory approach does not always lead to a real "shift" of power from the social workers to the service users. This false participation is also called "tokenism". *Tokenism* is based on



perfunctory involvement, without any profound commitment to equal participation and without a real chance of change (Arnstein, 1969). Whether the “false” involvement is a result of the social workers’ intention or just an accident caused by poor understanding of the problem (Thompson, 1998: 164), it actually tries to mask the power inequality between the social worker and the client and offers an illusion of shared decision-making competence.

Why and how should the children and youth be involved in the decision-making process? Do children and youth have sufficient capacity for making decisions? Children, and primarily youth, need to be involved in meaningful projects along with the adults. It is unrealistic to expect children and youth aged 16, 18 or 21 to instantly become responsible, involved, adult citizens without having at least some experience in this field and having the relevant feelings of responsibility (Hart, 1992: 5). Thus, the participatory approach is definitely needed in the social services provided to children and youth.

The involvement of the service users in the decision making concerning the service may take place at various levels - from the client’s decision about the ways of using the service, through to the choice of interior decorations, to the participation in the creation of activities to be carried out in NZDM. The use of the participatory approach in NZDM is also favoured by the declared goals, as defined by ČAS, specifically the goal “*establishing the conditions for the implementation of personal activities.*” In compliance with the principle of low-threshold and an effort to make the services available to the least accessible service users, the programme in NZDM is adjusted to the clients’ ideas and demands and needs. This setting may become a space for the service users’ participation in the decisions concerning its functioning.

The research into the participation of young users of social services in other environments (countries) has demonstrated that social workers and clients may have different notions of participation and the very word “participation” may have various meanings for them. The social workers perceive the clients’ participation either as a) involvement of clients in activities

and events related to the service or to their own lives (as opposed to passivity and rejection); b) clients’ assumption of responsibility for their own lives, as demonstrated by the very decision making being carried out when presented with various options; or c) an ability to negotiate about the goals of the cooperation between a client and the social service (Kvarnstrom, Hedberg, Cedersund, 2013: 292). Based on the research into how the participation is perceived by the service users themselves (Kvarnstrom, Willumsen, Andersson-Gare, Hedberg 2012), the clients consider the participation as a) comprehensive sharing of information from social workers; b) ability to choose and make decisions about the use of available sources; c) good relationships and communication (assuming mutual respect and equality); d) gaining insight into and understanding of their own life situation.

Another difference in the way the participation is perceived by the clients and the social workers has been revealed in the research carried out by Boehm and Staples. They demonstrated that social workers tend to emphasise the very process of empowerment, acquisition of competence and overall progress of cooperation with their clients, whereas the clients stress the importance of the results of cooperation (2002: 457). It may be assumed that the clients give more emphasis to the *development aspect* of participation which denotes the possibilities and methods for achieving a larger personal fulfilment, realisation and certain kinds of instant satisfaction, whereas the social worker stresses the *expressive aspect*, which relates to the conviction that the service users have a right to express their opinion about the provision and use of services and to influence the way the services are provided (Parsloe, 1990).

### **Participatory approach and empowerment**

The idea behind the participatory approach is the perspective of empowerment (Kubalčíková, 2009: 88). In relation to the participatory approach, the empowerment denotes a state as well as a process in which the participatory approach leads is also a component. The participatory approach is one way of boosting the empowerment of the social service users (Navrátil, 2000; Dalrymple, Burke, 1995). It is





based on a partner relationship between a social worker and a social service user.

Dalrymple, Burke (1995: 53–54) speak of three levels of empowerment. After presenting this model I will later use it as a model in researching the possible outcomes of the participatory approach's application.

The first level is the *level of feelings*. At this level, the possibility to express one's own feeling, to tell the story of one's own life, helps the individual to become more confident in the knowledge that she or he is being taken seriously (Rees, 1991: 21 in Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 53). This confidence is empowering. Hill-Collins (1990) points out that the process of self-conscious thought is an essential element of the empowerment process, with personal experience also being a key component (in Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 53).

The second level of empowerment is *ideas*. This relates to increased self-respect, and being conscience of one's own efficiency, i.e. conviction of one's own ability to achieve and control what happens in an individual's life (Bandura, 1982: 122 in Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 53). This area encompasses such concepts as reinforcing the function of ego, development of personal strength and power, feeling of control, development of client's initiative or increase in her or his ability to act (Gutierrez, 1990 in Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 53). These processes lead to a changed consciousness – self-knowledge, self-actualisation and self-definition (Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 53). Based on these two levels, people are able to lessen their helplessness and feeling of guilt and hopefully be able to increase a feeling of some higher ability and a possibility to change things around themselves. Developing self-knowledge and a sense of personal power enables people to develop new language (Rees, 1991: 95 in Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 53), e.g. an increased occurrence of language that expresses power, such as: "I want to make my own choices", "I know my rights", and "I'm in control" (Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 52).

The third level is that of *activity*. This level points towards the importance of the fact that the formulation and establishment of a decision is really influenced by those who are directly affected by a decision's impact (Hasenfield,

1987: 479 in Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 55). It may include political action aimed at changing the social institution, but above all it should be the ability to take joint action (not an individual one) of a group of people with a common goal. The objectives of empowerment at this level may be about changing legislation or policies, but can equally be about the small changes that may affect the life of one individual (Dalrymple, Burke, 1995: 55).

### Methodology

The objective of the research is to use the case study to exemplify the method for supporting the clients' participation in the NZDM environment.

The research was conducted as a case study for a specific NZDM, by means of qualitative examination. It has attempted to understand a particular social phenomenon in depth (Hendl, 2005). The particular NZDM, where the research took place, was selected purposely according to the criteria of a) operating in the socially excluded area; b) working with children and youth of a variety of ages (6–20); c) accessibility for research. For the sake of data triangulation, which should contribute to making as complex picture of the researched approach as possible (Silverman 2005), the research data was collected by three methods – interviews, analysis of documents and observation. The respondents in the interview were 6 workers of NZDM. The interviews were semi-structured with mostly open questions. The main topics of the interview were the process of cooperation with the service user from the first time they come to NZDM; the activities and programme of the NZDM; the rules of using the service; practical applications of standards of social services; the relationship between social workers and service users; social workers' ideas of participation, its presence in their work and their ideas of its pros and cons. The analysed materials include: documents maintained by the centre: the *methodology for providing the social services, conditions for providing the social services* (rules and rights of the clients), internal documents intended for the *recording of the work with clients* (a form for individual planning, service provision agreements), *articles of association of the*



organisation as well as the *website and other virtual data* produced by NZDM (e.g. data from social networks). Observation taken directly in the NZDM environment was used as an additional method for data acquisition. It took place during the opening hours of the NZDM and consisted of taking field-notes about the day-day life in the NZDM, the way social workers and service users coexist in this service with special focus on active participation of the service users.

The areas of examination were the methods of working with a client, including the levels of participation in the low-threshold centre for children and youth. The areas of investigation of the workers, documents and the environment of NZDM. The elements of participation also include the set up of the service which strives to share the decision making between the social workers and clients, and enables the clients to influence the events in NZDM. The assessment of “real” application was made possible thanks to the observations in NZDM. Yet, a proper assessment definitely lacks the opinion of the clients. When assessing the application of the participatory approach, an aid tool also encompassed the formulated prerequisites for application of the participatory approach, as defined by Beresford and Croft (1993).<sup>6</sup>

The research took place late March and early April 2013. Interviews with five NZDM workers were held consecutively. 5 of 6 members of the NZDM team agreed to participate in the interview. The 6th person that granted an interview was organisation deputy manager. Individual interviews were conducted outside the centre. The interviews, documents and field-notes from observation were analysed in Atlas.ti program. The acquired data was anonymised.

### **Applying the participatory approach in NZDM**

The application of the participatory approach in the selected NZDM is based on the methodological materials which draw on the Social Services Quality Standards. In compliance with the low-threshold principle declared in the NZDM Methodology Handbook, NZDM strives to maintain the voluntary approach of its clients and to enable them to influence the

centre’s programme. The voluntary approach to the use of services, i. e. voluntary involvement in the activities and voluntary attendance at the club, offers the clients a relatively large area for decision making in the use of social services. In relation to this principle, the possibility to influence the centre’s programme even enlarges the clients’ powers concerning the use of the service – this may be perceived as a guarantee for the clients to be involved in the decision making concerning the service itself.

The NZDM social workers themselves do not use the term “participatory approach”. The term had to be “translated” as “support of the clients’ involvement in the events that take place in the club”, which might be seen as a kind of interpretation and as such may “channel” the answers of the respondents. A degree to which “the involvement in the events” incorporates “the involvement in decisions” is open to question. This question will be explored in further consideration of the application of the participatory approach in the selected NZDM. The contact persons in NZDM are always willing to support the clients’ involvement, as they see the benefit it brings to both the clients and the service itself.

*“It is partly a shift of the responsibility for the space in the centre and partly we wanted to let them know they are allowed to make decisions.”* (Respondent 1)

They also see the benefit for the centre itself: *“It is definitely of benefit to everyone. For example speaking of the parties ... they are obviously more successful done this way than if we organise them ourselves.”* (Respondent 1)

It seems the social workers understand their approach as an involvement of clients in the decision-making process where they consider the clients as sharing responsibility for the events taking place in the centre. The centre is seen as a special space for training in the process of decision making. The fact that the social workers do not formulate the application of the participatory approach explicitly and do not apply it deliberately or systematically is obvious from their own statements describing a typical situation where the social workers predominantly react positively to the clients who come up with their own ideas and who actively “lay claim” to active participation in



the decision making process. This issue has been pointed out by one of the social workers who is convinced that the ability to take a less active role than the clients is a token of professionalism:

*"I think it is a conclusion that every social worker has to come to one day, not to have 2 or 3 blue-eyed boys and make plans with them, but instead to spread your attention and care even among the clients who are not that active."* (Respondent 3)

A tool to activate the less active clients is the individual planning and individual work of the contact worker with a client, the goal of which - as mentioned above - is to directly involve the client in the decision-making process.

As implied by the interviews with the social workers, there are several spheres and aspects of the services where the clients may intervene to a greater or lesser extent. The workers identified 3 areas where they would accept the participation of clients but in practice the participation does not take place, and another 3 areas where the clients actually participate in the decision making concerning the service. The three areas, where the clients' participation might be theoretically possible, though not happening in practice, are as follows:

- (1) Determination of the club's rules.
- (2) Determination of the NZDM opening hours.
- (3) Determination of the clients' rights in NZDM.

In all these areas, the contact workers were hypothetically in favour of the service users' involvement in the decision making concerning the users themselves, but simultaneously they expressed doubts as to whether the service users would be able to actually and effectively (from the social workers' point of view) make good decisions. Moreover, the service users are not currently invited to take part in the changes or updates of these areas, instead upon their entry to the NZDM the areas are presented as preset and invariable.

On the other hand, the areas where, according to the social workers, the clients do actually participate in decision making are as follows:

- (1) Determination of the goals of cooperation,

- (2) Arrangement of the club's interior and equipment,
- (3) Inventing and creating new activities in NZDM.

- (1) The first area where the active involvement of clients is inevitable, from the social workers' point of view, is the determination of the way the service is used. The way is identified at the final decision on the goal of cooperation. *"I do not set a personal goal for anyone. If the client told me he/she knows it is his/her problem but does not want to solve it, in spite of being aware of the problems it leads to, I simply do not push anyone into the task."* (Respondent 2)

Respect for the client's idea of the service use, in fact, derives from the low-threshold nature of this social service. The clients are entitled to leave the centre any time they want. They may choose any activity the centre offers. In consequence, if the clients only search for a safe space to sit around, it is still a legitimate way of using the service. Yet, it also means that in this case, the social workers abandon their effort to develop cooperation with the client.

- (2) According to the social workers, the clients also participate in the decision making about the interior layout of the club.

*"Of course, we can't convert or rebuilt a toilet just because someone doesn't like to be alone behind the doors, but as regards the decorations or furniture layout - if our girls want to have their lady's corner over here or there, why not."* (Respondent 2)

The clients are also allowed to come up with their own initiatives concerning the equipment of the club. That is how the clients made their contribution to the purchase of a table tennis table. Nevertheless, the degree of participation might have been increased in this case if the clients were engaged in the very purchase of the table, the same way they are involved in the decision making over interior decorations. Otherwise, the potential for the clients' empowerment remains unused and the social workers keep their roles as experts who "are able or empowered" to arrange for the purchase.

- (3) The NZDM workers, in their own words, emphasised the importance of allowing the



service users to actively participate in events within the low-threshold club. They refer to this ability as “not doing things instead of the clients”.

*“When we bend over backwards to help them, when have three different programmes prepared for one single day, they may get bored and be passive, (...) they may completely lose interest. But when they just sit there, not knowing what to do, then the ideas can just come spontaneously.” (Respondent 4)*

Through these activities which the clients perform by themselves the workers can evaluate their effort, qualities and skills.

*“Well, ...the fact that they work on the development of new skills spontaneously (...) gives the clients a sense of self-worth and importance and aims and reasons for things become more clearer.” (Respondent 6)*

The most frequent organised events are: *discotheques, football tournaments, cooking activities and trips*. Preparation and detailed planning form an integral part of the process of organising the activities. Clients are guided through the planning process by the social worker. The planning process has several clearly defined steps - determination of goals, time schedules, task allocation, desired results, and criteria for (non)achievement of a goal. Through these steps, the clients learn the procedure which they may use to reach their goals, they learn to formulate the goal and think of the sources with are necessary for achievement thereof.

Based on the current findings, it can be summarised that in the relevant NZDM there is an effort towards the use of the participatory approach and in some areas the approach actually works. The effort is, however, intuitive and concentrated on particular individuals who use the service. There is no decision-making process which would engage all the clients of the service at any one time.

In the NZDM team, the idea of introducing a *club senate* has arisen. The senate would be a tool to ensure common decision making. *“The senate would act like some kind of interest group. First we would take a topic and learn what others think about it, how they want something to be and how something will come about.” (Respondent 1)*

Although the application of the participatory approach is not explicitly declared or pursued as one of the goals of a NZDM concerned, it

fulfils several prerequisites for the application of this approach as they are stated by Beresford and Croft (1993).

Firstly, there is strong support by wider structures in the NZDM concerned. This primarily applies to the organisation management which encourages the widest possible involvement of clients in the decision making process. Similarly, the contact workers have access to sufficient resources in the form of local facilities and personnel capacities. The only deficiency is in the appropriate education of workers in this field, and the follow-up training of the clients. Education in the field of support of the clients' activity and their involvement in the life of the centre is to a certain extent overtaken by compulsory courses in social work, primarily in the sphere of individual planning, and by the respectful approach to clients. Nevertheless, what is missing is the education and training which would be oriented towards the sharing of decision making and support of client participation in the decision-making process. As the involvement of the clients takes place predominantly at the intuitive level, there is a lack of self-reflection on the question of whether the clients are sufficiently informed about the opportunity to participate in decision making, primarily in the fields which are perceived by the social workers as their correct domain (rules and rights of the clients). The social workers try to approach the clients so as to ensure that everyone has equal access in the participation of the decision making process, yet, various degrees of interest and activity on the part of the clients are still evident. The last prerequisite for the application of the participatory approach is in the mechanism of evaluation of participation levels in currently running programmes. Since the participation is not explicitly compulsory in the NZDM concerns, there is no such mechanism which can evaluate success rates of these programmes.

### **Participatory approach and its contribution to empowerment**

Based on the aforementioned examples of how an NZDM's clients are involved in the decision-making process and on the information available about the support given to aid this involvement, it is obvious that this approach pursues the goal



of empowering clients. The critical point in this process is the possibility to implement the clients' own ideas and encourage more participation in the decision making about events within the centre. In the course of organising their own activities, the clients are empowered at all three levels (see Dalrymple, Burke 1995: 53–54).

Planning and implementation of clients' own activities usually starts with an individual plan, a part of which is the determination of a goal, time schedule, allocation of tasks and the criteria for success. By encouraging the clients to formulate their own goals and treating them with respect, the centre workers allow the clients to share their stories, ask them about their opinions and viewpoints on their lives, they support them in the conviction that their opinion, story, will and ideas are important. Thanks to this cognizance, the empowerment takes place at *the level of feelings*. By subsequent guidance of the clients in the fulfilment of gradual steps, "realisation" of their success and causes of possible failure, the social worker supports an awareness of his/her own efficiency and ability to influence what happens in his/her life. As the client passes through the deliberate process of achieving his/her personal goal, he/she is empowered at *the level of ideas*.

The empowerment at *the level of activity* takes place when the service user sees that things may happen just as he/she imagines it to. This kind of empowerment happens when clients with a common goal succeed in furthering this goal. At this level, it is not enough to have individual planning and implementing of his/her activities. It is important to work with the whole group and to enable it to achieve its common goals. Then, the environment of a NZDM may function as "a training ground" where the clients jointly learn to identify the common goals and jointly try to achieve them. The level of empowerment in an NZDM is still implemented only at an individual level, at the moment it lacks a group aspect. The service may develop in this direction, e.g. through the aforementioned club senate.

Yet, there is still the question of how does the NZDM which can make its users empowered within its protected environment (the "training ground") prepare them further for applying these new abilities outside in their everyday lives.

## Summary

This case study only dealt with one specific example of a NZDM and that's why its findings are only applicable to its specific context. While it gives some examples and creates discussion about this topic, the research would have to cover more NZDMs and also include the service users to bring a complex picture of the potential of participation in the context of drop-in social services.

This case study has shown that in this NZDM the service user's involvement in the decision making process has no particular rules and no formalised definition within the NZDM Methodology and formal rules, though it actually happens in practice. Research showed three areas, in which participation takes place a) determination of the goals of cooperation; b) arrangement of the club interior and equipment; c) inventing and creating new activities in NZDM. There are also areas in which the social workers see possible involvement but its nonexistence is according to them mostly due to the inability of the service users to participate, or the inappropriate conditions of NZDM. These three areas are 1) determination of the club's rules; 2) determination of the NZDM opening hours; 3) determination of the clients' rights in NZDM.

From the point of view of the participation ladder focused on children and youth (Hart, 1992), the implementation of activities, invented by the clients themselves, may be seen as "decisions initiated by children and shared by adults". Yet, the range of activities that may be performed by children is still to a great extent limited by the social service, its orientation and activities which may be implemented in the framework of the service. Thus, the model of co-decision making in the NZDM concerned may be seen as "initiated by adults and shared by children". The contact workers may decide that the clients should be entitled to participate in the creation of activities in the club, and the clients may subsequently enjoy the right.

As shown, participation can have an empowering effect on the service users, but it mostly applies to the activities carried out in the NZDM. According to Adams (2008) it may be concluded that it is much more *involvement* in decision making than participation in the





meaning of assumption of power and resources that are necessary for influencing the policy and management of services. Transferability of abilities and competences which the clients learn in an NZDM remains an open question with respect to the application of the participatory approach. It is difficult to judge to what extent the clients actually apply the learned competences in reality, i.e. in their lives, environments where they possibly live or function in. In the socially excluded environment where relationships are weak and the usually available sources are twice as hard to access, the results may only be monitored with difficulty. It is not even clear whether the learned strategies, e.g. joint decision making or joint search for the achievement of goals, work in environments outside of the NZDM, where it is necessary for the clients to make decisions with other groups of people.

I assume NZDM has no big aspirations in the terms of producing active agents of social change. Its drop-in character means that the service users vary a lot, spend often short times in the social service itself, see it as an option for spending their free time and don't usually come with the goal of learning "how to participate in public life as active citizens". Therefore the question of the limits of participatory approach in the NZDM is in place. To answer this question I would suggest an extension of the research focusing on the service users and their understanding and ideas about participation and the NZDM social service.

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- 5 By “experts” I mean local professionals working in NGOs, social services and municipality.
- 6 Prerequisites for participatory approach, according to Beresford and Croft (1993): The first prerequisite is the arrangement for (1) sufficient sources. These sources include *a place* where the participatory approach might be applied, *support* by the stakeholders, *knowledge of* and *acquaintance with* the principles of this approach. The second assumption is (2) provision of information about the scope of the problem, accessible sources, support and potential solutions. The service users must be acquainted with the problem which they are expected to address in their decision making, with potential solutions to choose from. In the course of the participatory process, (3) education must take place, i.e. the improvement of abilities to lead and to participate. While the users are being involved in the decision making process, it is still necessary to boost their ability to participate and - at the same time - to educate social workers on the methods for leading the process. The fourth assumption (4) is the equal access to the services and equal opportunities to participate - all the users must have equal access to the participation opportunity. Another prerequisite (5) is the existence of suitable structures which will support the participation and will increase the involvement rate. If an organisation is set “against” participation, this will never function properly. This is closely related to (6) the use of language and terminology which is comprehensible to the participants. The process of involving the users should be free of any “academic language” which the users are unable to understand. The last prerequisite (7) is the existence of an evaluating mechanism which should assess whether the suitable conditions were established for the user to participate.

#### Notes

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- 2 Contact: Mgr. Anna Krchnáková. Department of Social Policy and Social Work, Faculty of Social Studies, Joštova 10, 602 00 Brno. E-mail: a.krchnava@mail.muni.cz
- 3 This area is being gentrified in the last years so the numbers of socially excluded inhabitants may have decreased since 2010.
- 4 This number is estimated by local experts, because the ethnicity is a self-proclaimed category and only a very few members of the Roma ethnic minority proclaim themselves “Roma” in an official way, e.g. in national census.



# Client Violence in Social Work Practice: Conflict Styles of Victims

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## Abstract

This study deals with incidents of client violence and their connection to the conflict styles of the victims. It lists the most important findings in the areas of client violence in social work practice. The research is based on a survey and its objective was to detect the incidences of individual client violence cases and their possible connection to the conflict styles of the victims.

315 respondents to the study were from the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, the employees of crisis centres, re-socialisation centres and foster homes. The survey results showed a high incidence of verbal abuse. On the other hand, the study did not confirm any connection between a conflict attitude of the victims and the incidence of client violence. The respondents used mainly collaborating as a conflict style; men opt for competing as a conflict style more often than women and the respondents reached higher scores in the cooperativeness indexes than in the assertiveness indexes.

## Keywords

client violence, verbal abuse, physical violence, conflict styles, assertiveness index, cooperativeness index



## Introduction

Client violence was already a research project of foreign specialists in the 1980s. Client violence used to be understood as a certain form of workplace violence. Therefore, it was examined especially by psychologists and specialists working in those fields where client violence exists. In other words, client violence is any act of violence committed by the recipient of any service toward the particular service provider. The first research in this area was aimed at helping professionals in general, primarily physicians, health care personnel, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers (Bernstein, 1981; Star, 1984; Lanza, 1984; Black, Compton, Werzel, Minchin, Farber, Rastogi-Cruz, 1994). However, this problem does not relate only to the professions mentioned above. It also concerns high risk professions (e.g. gambling house operators, non-stop shop assistants in remote areas or petrol stations). Paradoxically, the perpetrator of violence within helping professions might be the recipient of the service.

In fact, it is not a paradox at all. The aggression can be logically explained. Any tense situation or crisis (social, medical or personal) together with any other aggression increasing factors can act as a trigger for aggressive behaviour.

Client violence is a specific type of violence and in helping professions, its higher incidence rate may be caused by typical behavioural syndromes (fatigue syndrome, burnout syndrome and so on). Nowadays, the problem is undervalued and organizations do not put sufficient emphasis on prevention of its formation (Halachová, Fedorová, Žiaková, 2014). Besides, it is important to bear in mind that there are more stressful situations when conflict situations at work increase (Šiňanská, Šandlová, 2013).

## Client Violence – Workplace Violence

In Slovakia, the term workplace violence is commonly perceived as victimization at work and is linked to terms such as mobbing, bossing etc. However, workplace violence is a complex phenomenon. The literature lists terms, such as work-related violence and workplace violence. Terms work-related aggression and workplace aggression are used as synonyms. Kelloway (2006) tries to distinguish between workplace

aggression and workplace violence. Kelloway refers to workplace aggression as a broader term which includes workplace violence. Workplace violence is often understood as a certain type of aggression, namely a physical maltreatment.

Kelloway (2006) distinguishes between physical and mental aggression and uses the term mental workplace aggression as a form of psychical maltreatment. Lovaš (2001) claims that all forms of client violence and aggression occur in the workplace. Moreover, they are mutually combinable but in different ways. Therefore, the workplace violence should be categorized. Our research is based on the categorization of basic types of aggression: physical, verbal, direct, indirect, passive and active and their combinations.

The incidence of workplace violence should be classified according to the source of violence. Victims of workplace violence are always workers, employees. The potential source of violence at work comes from a colleague, a co-worker, a superior, a subordinate. Incidences of client violence within an organization are unexceptional. Workplace violence of this kind is usually referred to as mobbing. This term can be explained as a systematic torment or psychological terror (Lovaš, 2001). Bullying is another term that can be used in this connection.

Lovaš (2009) presents a different terminology, which classifies workplace violence as 'harassment'. The term workplace harassment can be found in foreign literature and does not indicate any sexual harassment. Lovaš understands the two terms 'bullying' and 'mobbing' as equivalents, even though the term mobbing is used more often in European countries.

Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2003) define the term 'bullying/mobbing' as harassment, insults and social segregation at work with a negative impact on work. They claim that this phenomenon can be referred to as bullying/mobbing only if the term occurs repetitively, at least once a week for a period of six months. This corresponds also to H. Leymann's definition. This theory does not consider important the relationship of the aggressor to the victim. They claim that the aggressor might be a co-worker, subordinate or superior to the victim.



A potential aggressor might be a stranger coming into the organization from outside; s/he might not be a co-worker (Lovaš, 2009). This case is referred to as client violence. Client violence differs from the standard workplace violence in many aspects, namely in the aggressor who is a stranger coming in order to use or to find service/help/care. Furthermore, it differs in the repetitiveness or frequency of the incidence of committed violent acts (e.g. mobbing is an act repeated over a period of a few months). However, also an isolated incidence is understood to be an act of client violence.

Naturally, several professions are more exposed to workplace violence due to the nature of the job (e.g. barkeeper, night-club dancer, pump man, gambling house operator) or the high-risk clientele and the environment (facilities in high-risk districts etc.).

The organizations which focus on collecting data about workplace violence classify workplace violence into specific categories and thus simplify the interpretation of violence. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, USA) divides the workplace violence into four categories:

- I. The first type is the most common type of workplace violence. The workplace violence is committed by a stranger in high-risk occupations such as 24-hour stores, liquor stores, 24-hour gambling clubs, jewellery stores etc.
- II. The second type of violence includes incidents during which an employee providing the service becomes the victim. In this type of workplace violence the perpetrator is the recipient of a provided service. For example: a social worker-client relationship or an act committed by a patient in a medical institution.
- III. The third type of violence involves the incidents, in which the perpetrator is the person working in the same organization as the victim. The perpetrator can be a co-worker, a former employee or a superior.
- IV. The fourth type of violence is committed at the workplace by someone who does not work there, but has a personal relationship with an employee or is important to an

employee – to a victim (a partner, a mate, a friend). In several cases, the wife or the husband of the employee acts as an aggressor.

Foreign literature classifies the client violence toward social workers as the II. type of violence. This categorization is accepted mainly in the USA and is often used for the differentiation of individual types of workplace violence. Maxey (Newhill, 2003) distinguishes between internal and external workplace violence. This categorization classifies the workplace violence according to the type of the aggressor – whether he is familiar with the victim or not.

Newhill (2003) states, that according to this categorization, client violence toward social workers belongs to the internal form of workplace violence, even if it concerns the very first contact with a client. The categories mentioned above would classify violence towards the social workers in Slovakia as an external type of violence. According to the results of research done in 2009 (Lovašová, 2013), the social workers often face client aggression during first contact, therefore it involves an unknown person.

One of the first definitions of client violence in the USA (Beaver, 1999: 10) states that client violence represents intentional damage to property, threats, verbal abuse or an attempt to cause physical harm to a social worker or another service provider. The potential source of violence is an individual, who can be an applicant, a recipient or a former recipient of services. According to this type of violence, client violence can be defined as any physical or verbal threat, any attack towards the social worker (or another helping worker). Further, client violence is classified as any damage of the worker's property, the property of the institution in which the services are provided caused by a former client or by the client's family member (Newhill, 1995, 1996, 2003; MacDonald, Sirotych, 2001; Jayaratne, Croxton, Mattison, 2004; Ringstad, 2005).

In the meantime, other forms of client violence were detected and defined in the individual studies (Koritsas, Coles, Boyle, 2010; Harris, Leather, 2012; Regehr, Glancy, 2011). A single categorization that would include all the



types of violence would be extensive and incomprehensible.

With regard to the types of aggression, a social worker can experience instrumental aggression from clients, who make an effort to manage complicated situations or to achieve their objective with the help of aggressive agendas. Social workers can also experience emotional aggression. This aggression grows spontaneously by the intensification of a client's problem or by offering a solution to the situation which the client does not agree with. Situations with emotional aggression such as family life problems, child loss or any changes in child-raising are typical for the Slovak environment, as is shown by the results of the research test of 2009 (Lovašová, 2013). Buss' three-dimensional partition (1992) asserts that all forms of violence, either offensive or defensive aggressions, are discernible.

### **Studies' overview**

The increasing incidence of client violence can be caused by a combination of several factors (Newhill, 1996, 2003; Jayaratne et al., 1996, 2004; Robson, Cossar, Quayle, 2014): media influence, the general prevalence of violence and criminality, high unemployment rates, current worldwide recession, the greater availability of small arms etc. The first research into the area of client violence was related to the helping professions in general. The research was focused on physicians, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers (Bernstein, 1981; Star, 1984; Lanza, 1984; Black, Compton, Werzel, Minchin, Farber, Rastogi-Cruz, 1994). Research from neighbouring countries also focused on physicians and health care personnel, e.g. the research focused on nurses as victims of patients' violence conducted in Poland (2009) or the research on employees of psychiatric institutes in the Czech Republic (Brožová, Vančura, 2010). Christina E. Newhill (1996) is one of the most important experts in the area of client violence in social work. Her study of prevalence and risk factors of client violence towards social workers is a breakthrough in this area. An exploratory survey was conducted in 1993 in Pennsylvania and California. 1,129 respondents participated in the survey. The respondents were social workers, members of

the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Newhill's questionnaire defines three types of client violence: property damage, verbal threatening and threat in the form of physical gestures and actual physical attack. Newhill further divides these types into two sub-categories: an actual physical attack (a client has physical contact with a social worker) and an attempted physical attack (does not involve physical contact). The study showed that 57 per cent of the respondents experienced one or more types of client violence during their career, 83 per cent of the respondents were threatened by a client and 40 per cent experienced an attempted or an actual physical attack from a client.

In 2002, Shields and Kiser (2003) conducted a survey in the USA with the aim to ascertain the extent and type of client violence toward social workers. The respondents were child welfare social workers and workers providing financial assistance with an overall sample of 171 respondents. The authors of the questionnaire defined mental violence as non-physical violence involving threats, abuse and shouting at workers during the conversation with a client. Physical attacks include hitting, throwing objects or "grabbing" a social worker, i.e. situations of physical contact between a client and a social worker. The worker makes an effort to de-escalate the client's violence by means of communication. In the questionnaire, 56 per cent of the respondents indicated that they experienced a threat of violence while working with clients. Almost 10 per cent of the respondents were physically attacked by a client. The majority of the respondents experienced client's verbal abuse or insults during their work with a client and 28 per cent of the respondents indicated that they were verbally sexually abused. A great proportion of the respondents (67 per cent) felt in danger during their visit to a client's home.

In 2004, Jayaratne, Croxton and Mattison (2004) conducted a national survey of violence in the USA on the sample of 941 respondents randomly selected from NASW membership directory. Introduced sample included social workers from different spheres of social work – health care, mental health care, education system, family care and family services and



other. They focused on the individual forms of client violence and the results demonstrated that 22.8 per cent of the respondents were physically threatened during their practice, physical attack was experienced by 3.3 per cent of the respondents, 15.1 per cent of workers were threatened with a lawsuit, 1.4 per cent sued, 49.3 per cent verbally attacked and 8.4 per cent sexually harassed.

Koritsas, Coles and Boyle (2010) conducted a survey about client violence in Australia from a sample of 1,000 respondents addressed on the basis of a membership register of the Australian Association of Social Workers. The authors used a questionnaire to investigate during the last twelve months of the respondent's practice the incidence of six forms of violence. In particular, they focused on verbal attacks, property damage or theft, intimidation, physical violence, sexual harassment and sexual attack. Sixty-seven per cent of the respondents had experienced at least one of the mentioned forms of violence during the last year, 57 per cent of the respondents were verbally attacked, 18 per cent had their property damaged or were robbed, 47 per cent of the respondents were intimidated, 9 per cent physically attacked, 15 per cent sexually harassed and 1 per cent of the respondents stated they were sexually attacked. The research in Finland analysed the workers' accident compensation payments for 2003 to 2006. Authors (Hintikka, Saarela, 2010) compared professions with a prevalence of work violence and detected the average number of incidences from a sample of 1,000 employees. The average insurance compensation for workplace violence of social workers was 2.97 per cent in 2003 of the sample of 1,000 employees (3.57 per cent men, 2.89 women), and in 2006 the number increased to 4.85 per cent. The amount has risen more significantly for women (4.83 per cent) whereas it was 4.79 per cent for men.

The study that focused on the social work students (Criss, 2010) stated that 41.7 per cent of the students experienced any form of client violence, 37.5 per cent verbal violence, 3.5 per cent physical attack and up to 60.2 per cent experienced client violence themselves or witnessed acts of aggression.

After summing up the stated results of the

research projects performed regarding social workers, the principal factors concerning age, gender and targets determined certain groups with regard to risk factors.

*Age:* Jayaratne, Croxton and Mattison (2004) examined a sample of 941 social workers in the USA regarding the individual forms of client violence and verified the selected risk factors, involving age as well. They found out that the high risk social workers were younger female workers under the age of 45. Koritsas, Coles and Boyle (2010) performed the research in Australia with the sample of 1000 social workers, analysed the survey results and concluded that younger social workers are more often exposed to client violence, especially in the form of verbal attacks and client intimidation.

*Gender:* authors (Jayaratne, Croxton, Mattison, 2004; Robson, Cossar, Quayle 2014; Rey, 1996; Shields, Kiser, 2003) consider women to be more at risk in cases of thefts and property damages as forms of violence caused by clients. Newhill (1996) in the research in the USA involving a sample of 1129 social workers declares that male social workers were more threatened by violence from a client due to the fact that men work more frequently with high-risk clientele. However, some authors did not find gender differences in the incidence of client violence (Padyab, Chelak, Nygren, Ghosinour, 2012; Winstanley, Halles, 2008).

*The target group:* Littlechild (2005), Robson, Cossar, Quayle (2014) states that child social service belongs to the fields of social work with the higher incidence of workplace violence. Newhill (1996) considers social workers working in the sphere of criminal justice and with clients with abuse of substance issues (drugs, alcohol) the most at risk. This statement is also confirmed by the basic characteristic of addicted clients as high-risk clients with a high lack of self-control (Lichner, 2014).

Naturally, the social system in every country is organized differently. Therefore, it is interesting to make a comparison of the probability of client violence in the individual spheres of social work in compliance with target groups.

Besides basic factors (age, gender, education, target group), researchers also deal with other possible connections. A very interesting study of Iranian social workers (Padyab, 2013) was





published in 2013. The study examined the impact of client violence on victims. The researchers focused on the link between client violence and coping mechanisms. The study demonstrated that the coping mechanism had a demonstrably good influence on health and that majority of respondents were using active coping strategies.

In 2013, the study (Lovašová, Rontóová, 2013) with a sample of 100 respondents, employees of the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (further OLSAF), showed that 84 per cent of the respondents experienced verbal attack, 49 per cent physical threats and 22 per cent physical attack. The results proved that the amount of victims increased significantly. The study also ascertained that preventive measures and supervision interventions are implemented more in workplaces with a higher frequency of client violence.

In 2009, another survey (Lovašová, 2013) was conducted on a sample of 177 social workers, employees of OLSAF working at the department of unemployment, welfare and social curatorship (child care). This survey primarily showed that 75 per cent of respondents faced verbal violence, 32 per cent experienced physical threats and 11 per cent of the respondents under-went physical attack.

Moreover, the survey discovered a connection between client-initiated violence and the methods of dealing with aggressive situations that social workers use. The survey was based on the ZAS questionnaire (L. Lovaš) which recognizes four types of coping with received aggression. The survey further analysed any possible connection between the incidence of verbal abuse and aggression coping style. This connection has been confirmed for the appeasement factor. It may indicate that social workers who tend to solve the conflict situation by appeasement experienced more verbal violence from clients.

The author further investigated the extent of aggressiveness through the AQ questionnaire (A. H. Buss, M. P. Perry), which consists of four subscales and assess physical and verbal aggression, anger and hostility. However, no connection was detected between the individual subscales, the total aggressiveness score and the incidence of verbal violence.

### Conflict styles

The author focuses on victims and their behaviour during and after a conflict situation, and their management of the situation. The research analyses conflict styles of respondents, victims of client violence, and the identification of any possible connections. The study is based on a premise that any situation of client violence results from "a disagreement or controversy in interests, values, goals or ideas" (Volkema, Bergmann, 1995: 9), Volkema and Bergmann thus introduced a brief definition of conflict.

Rahim and Magner's questionnaire (1995) detects 5 different conflict resolution styles: avoiding, dominating, compromising, integrating and obliging, and was the starting point for the examination of conflict styles. It was later modified by Wilmot and Hocker (2013) according to the Thomas-Killmann Model (1977).

The conflict styles present certain structured reactions – a certain system of reactions in a conflict situation. The conflict styles can also be understood as certain tactics, a way of communicating and a reaction to a specific conflict situation. A repeatedly used tactics is classified as a conflict style (Hocker, Wilmot, 2013). The individual styles are not definite; most of the population uses several conflict styles as the particular style is chosen according to the conflict situation.

The models of conflict styles are different and have undergone certain development. Thomas-Killmann's Model (1977) is currently

**Table 1: Suffered aggression and incidence of client violence**

Correlation coefficient	Contra-aggression	Helplessness	Heedlessness	Appeasement
	- 0.10	0.10	0.05	0.17*

**Table 2: Degree of aggression and incidence of verbal violence**

Correlation coefficient	Physical aggression	Verbal aggression	Anger	Hostility	CS aggressiveness
	- 0.08	- 0.00	0.01	- 0.03	- 0.03



predominant; the model is divided into five parts according to the needs of an individual, the interests in other people and a compromise as its midpoint:

- **Avoidance.** Avoidance is characterized by an effort to avert the conflict, avoid it, to postpone it or not to participate in it. Several tactics of avoiding exist and there forms are combinable, e.g. denial and prevarication, theme management, avoidant comments, irrelevant comments etc.
- **Competition.** Competition is a style that maximizes reaching one's power and goals. An individual is oriented towards enforcement of self-interests and a pursuit of the direct confrontation. It is possible to apply competition by aggressive (competitive destruction) or assertive approach (self-assertion without any effort to cause harm to others). Competing is suitable when quick and decisive reaction is necessary.
- **Compromise.** The compromise is referred to as the medium style. The compromise means that the goal will be obtained at the price of a certain loss. The compromise can be replaced by collaborating. However, no concessions are necessary in the collaboration style.
- **Accommodation.** The Accommodation style is oriented towards the interest of others, either voluntarily (I really want to meet your needs, this is my goal) or involuntarily (e.g. work-related conflict – I have no other possibility). It is sometimes difficult to identify whether it is a conflict style or not.
- **Collaboration.** Collaborating style is the most constructive one and accomplishes satisfaction for both parties. This conflict style allows a resolution that is mutually satisfactory, although it can take longer. The resolution is long-lasting.

It is possible to analyse the conflict styles by means of various methods. On the basis of activity, they can be divided into active styles (competing, collaborating) and passive styles (avoiding and accommodation). The compromise remains in the middle but might be understood as the passive style (a person approaches the compromise automatically without any effort to find another solution) or

the active style (when compromise is the result of the "fight").

It is possible to deal with the conflict style also by means of calculation of the assertiveness index and the cooperativeness index. The calculation of the assertiveness index and the cooperativeness index is more reliable (Bergmann, Volkema, 1995; Lavin, 1990).

$$\text{Assertiveness index} = (\text{Competing} + \text{Collaborating}) - (\text{Avoiding} + \text{Accommodating})$$

A high degree of assertive behaviour is detected in competing and collaborating styles; on the contrary, avoiding and accommodating styles reveal certain submissiveness.

$$\text{Cooperativeness index} = (\text{Collaborating} + \text{Accommodating}) - (\text{Competing} + \text{Avoiding})$$

Collaborating and accommodating styles mean that a person inclines to cooperation rather than to a fight or avoidance.

The calculation of indices is based on Thomas-Killmann's Model (1977) and it has been verified in several studies (Bergmann, Volkema, 1995; Lavin, 1990; Thomas, 1992). At present the authors use also the model of five conflict styles (Mazaheri, Basil, Yanamandram, Daroczi, 2011; Chan, Sit, Lau, 2014), and assertiveness and cooperation (Sportsman, Hamilton, 2007; Slabert, 2004; Koc, 2010). Bergmann and Volkema (1995) recommend it as the appropriate calculation for the tendency to some kind of behaviour in a conflict situation.

The objective of the ongoing research was, besides mapping the client violence under conditions in SR, also verifying the personality factors chosen in advance and several risk factors. The author is interested in behaviour of the victims in conflict situations and looking for the relations between this behaviour and the incidence of client violence.

The author in the research performs calculations of five conflict styles as well as with the indices, however, as the highest score was achieved in the conflict style compromise, which is not included in the indices calculation, it was impossible to validate the calculations or to prove the correlations between the indices and violence incidence in clients. The reason was probably in the respondents' attempt to



present the answers that would be more socially desirable.

### Methodology

The author has been dealing with the issue of client violence since 2007 the ongoing research is based on several preliminary studies which, besides the primary findings of the state of several institutions, served also for verification of the methodology. Another support item of the research is the detailed study and analyses of the research studies performed.

Regarding the state of researching the issue in SR, the overall objective of the research was determined as follows:

- To find out the frequency of the individual forms of client violence
- To verify the elementary risk factors from the aspect of workers: age, gender, education, labour position, type of subject providing social services (the area of social work performed )
- To verify the elementary risk factors from the aspect of the client: age, gender, problem, situation, place of attack
- To verify the prevention system
- To verify the selected personal characteristics and their correlation to the incidence of the client violence: conflict styles and sensitivity regarding injustice

In selecting the personal characteristics, the author looked back at previous research (Lovašová 2013; Lovašová, Rontóová, 2013), where she verified the strategies of controlling aggression as the personality feature of the respondents. The correlations, however, have not been proven. Therefore, the author selected other personal characteristics, which could be related to specific incidents and the frequency of the client violence.

One characteristic was the conflict style of the victim – the worker. The way the social worker behaves during the conflict. The author pointed to the fact, that the violent incident can be understood in the context of most of the situations as a conflict. Another characteristic, which was verified, is sensitivity to injustice. The research took place in the form of questionnaires. A questionnaire battery was used consisting of several parts – questionnaires

- Questionnaire Client violence :
  - CV by the authors Jayaratne, Croxton a Mattison (2004), finding out 10 basic forms of client violence
  - Verbal violence (VV) , finding out forms of verbal aggression
  - Physical violence (PV), finding out forms of physical aggression
- Questionnaire Risk characteristics of the client
  - Place of attack
  - Personal characteristics of the client
  - Problem situation
- Questionnaire Prevention at the workplace
- Questionnaire Conflict styles by the authors Rahim and Magner
- Questionnaire Sensitivity to injustice by Lovaš
- Data of the respondents

This report presents only one part of the long-term national research, which deals with possible connections between client violence incidence, conflict resolution styles and anger management. The objective of the research is to fulfil the partial targets:

- to detect the incidence of individual forms of client violence
- to detect conflict styles and their connection to the incidence of client violence
- to detect conflict styles index and its connection to client violence

A survey was conducted via a standardised asking of questionnaires. The report for the needs hereof applied Part 1 (CV – Client Violence) detecting the main forms of client violence. This part was partly adapted to the method of Jayaratne, Croxton and Mattison (2004). The report further applied Part 2 (VV – Verbal Violence) focused on forms of verbal violence, Part 3 (PV – Physical Violence) detecting forms of physical violence, Part 4 which is presented by a Conflict style questionnaire, and finally the report employed selected questions from Part 5 referring to the social and demographic characteristics of respondents.

The responses were given on a six-point Likert frequency scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (daily). The conflict style questionnaire



possesses its particular frequency scale which, was not changed due to the preservation of the initial score. The polarity of scales remained uniform. The introductory instruction in the conflict style questionnaire stated: “Think about the situation in which you experience a conflict with a client.”

Scores were calculated from all parts of the questionnaire except the last one. Finally, the overall calculations on client violence (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.921$ ) were calculated from parts 1 (CV), 2 (VV) and 3 (PV).

Conflict style questionnaire (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.827$ ) determined 5 different styles of conflict resolutions, which are not definite. A certain inclination towards certain styles may occur, e.g. avoiding, competing, compromise, collaborating and accommodating. Each style is kept by five items. Besides working with individual styles, we also work with a cooperativeness index (Collaborating + Accommodating) – (Competing + Avoiding) and an assertiveness index (Competing + Collaborating) – (Avoiding + Accommodating).

### Respondents

The respondents were selected randomly from the alphabetical lists of the selected institutions in the individual regions of Slovakia. The selection considered the request of the overall territorial coverage of SR and the evenness of representation of the individual types of subjects (from the geographic aspect and the proportional aspect as well). For this reason, in every autonomous region a certain number of the individual types of subjects providing the services in the area of social services and social assistance were allotted. The directors of selected institutions were addressed by telephone.

Subsequently, the mutual agreement was reached and a certain number of questionnaires were sent by ‘snail mail’. The number of questionnaires varied according to the institution and number of employees. This

ensured a high return rate of questionnaires (315 out of 360). Three hundred and fifteen respondents (259 women, 47 men, 9 did not respond) – employees of OLSAF, foster houses, crisis and re-socialisation centres participated in the survey. It is important to acknowledge, that the institutions were addressed as a unit.

Therefore, various types of employees participated in the survey. They were divided into several categories according to their job title and level of education. Following professions were represented: social workers (n=134), administrative workers (n=44), helping professions, e.g. psychologists, therapists, special education teachers (n=25) and other professions, e.g. professional parents, housekeepers and maintenance workers (n=91). Regarding education, respondents achieved: university degree in social work (n=93), university degree in another field (n=124) or secondary education (n=68). Age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 76 years and the average age was 42, 61.

### Organization of the survey

The survey presents only one part of the long-running research. This report’s data were collected during a period of four months, from March to June 2014. Results were processed with the statistical software SPSS 16.0.

### Results

Twenty five forms of client violence were examined. Ten forms were of a general character, including physical threats, attacks, complaints reported to the supervisor, telephone harassment, sexual harassment, property damage, six forms of a verbal character: shouting, invectives, offenses, threats, mockery, intimidation; and physical violence forms: slap, shove, kick, spit, weapon injury, hit. In order to ensure the transparency, the most frequented forms are listed in the table 4.

The most frequent forms of violence are shouting, swearing, abuse. These verbal forms have an active character. Respondent’s experienced physical threats (42.5 per cent) and

**Table 3: Age of respondents**

	n	Min	Max	Mean	St. dev.
Age of respondents	294	22	76	42.61	10.356



17.1 per cent of the respondents experienced at least one attack. More than 37 per cent of the respondents experienced the damage of the institutional property.

As in the stated research outlines (Newhill, 1995, 1996, 2003; Rey, 1996; Jayaratne et al., 1996, 2004; Shields, Kiser, 2003; Robson, Cossar, Quayle, 2014), also the author found out, that the most frequent forms of aggression was verbal aggression. Vice versa, the physical aggression is compared to other researches (Newhill, 2003; Jayaratne et al., 2004; Winstanley, Halles, 2008; Littlechild, 2005) and found to be lower, which can be considered positive. However, probably there are differences in its incidence depending on the type of the subject. This should draw the attention of the research to the risks. Specific features of the individual subjects providing social services should be determined.

The general outline of client violence is listed in table 5. The respondents could evaluate the questionnaires with a range from 1 to 6. The table lists also the gender categorization. It is obvious that respondents have mostly

experienced verbal violence; women reached a higher score than men.

However, because of the obvious disproportion between men (47) and women (259), it is impossible to talk about the generally applicable conclusions. Besides, also different research studies show different results (Jayaratne, Croxton, Mattison, 2004; Robson, Cossar, Quayle 2014; Rey, 1996, Shields, Kiser, 2003; Padyab, Chelak, Nygren, Ghozinour, 2012; Winstanley, Halles, 2008). In general we can say, that in the social sphere in SR a considerably higher number of men are involved, therefore to verify the gender as the risk factor is practically impossible.

Detailed t-test measurement was taken and it is possible to claim that in spite of the fact that women reached a slightly higher score than men, there exist no significant differences. Accordingly, this survey sample, with validity and restrictions (inequality of men and women), has proven, that no gender differences were found in the incidence of client violence.

Another part of the survey deals with conflict

**Table 4: Incidence of the selected forms of client violence**

Form of Client Violence	n	Mean (1-6)	At least 1 exp. (%)
Physical threat	313	1.60	42.5 %
Physical attack	311	1.19	17.1 %
Telephone threat	314	1.36	25.7 %
Bad language	312	2.46	69.8 %
Shouting	313	2.83	82.9 %
Insults	311	2.02	57.1 %
Jog	311	1.29	20.6 %
Spit	310	1.16	12.4 %
Damage to inst. property	311	1.65	37.5 %

**Table 5: Reached score with gender classification**

	OS	CV	VV	PV
Together	1.606	1.519	2.155	1.180
Men	1.501	1.454	1.928	1.176
Women	1.625	1.531	2.196	1.180

**Table 6: Gender differences in the incidence of client violence**

	Men	Women	t	p
CS	1.501	1.625	-1.365	0.173
CV	1.454	1.531	-1.055	0.292
VV	1.928	2.196	-1.591	0.113
PV	1.176	1.180	-0.071	0.943



styles of the respondents. Table 7 offers the review of individual styles' score with the classification according to gender.

Within the framework of conflict styles and its interpretation we can state, that the highest score was reached by the respondents in the collaborating style and the lowest score was reported in the competing style. Within the framework of gender differences, women reached lower scores in the competing style. The difference is at the level  $p=0.014$ . Therefore, it can be stated, that the use of the competing style on the part of women is significantly lower.

In the first line of the Table 7, there is the overall achieved score of the conflict styles in the research test. The most frequently used conflict style is collaborating. The least used is competing. However, it is impossible to eliminate the possibility, that the respondents opted for the socially most advantageous option, so results may not be therefore be a true reflection of the facts..

Table 8 shows the correlation findings of the relation between the overall score of client

violence and the individual conflict styles.

Table 8 presents the findings regarding the correlation of the utilisation of the individual conflict styles and the achieved scores of client violence. The score of client violence is divided into three scores: overall score (OS CV), physical violence score (FV) and verbal violence score (VV).

It can be stated, that there is a negative correlation between the incidence of physical forms of violence and avoiding, as well as between the incidence of the physical forms of violence and a compromise. In cases of incidence of verbal forms the correlations were not proven. As the score of physical violence is significantly lower than of verbal violence, definitely it is necessary to research and verify these experiences in more details in the larger research sample.

Cooperativeness and assertiveness indices showed that respondents rather opt for collaborating. However, neither t-test, nor correlation detected any significant differences. The test focused on gender differences;

**Table 7: Differences in conflict styles according to gender**

	Avoiding	Competing	Compromise	Accommodating	Collaborating
<b>Together</b>	14.564	12.133	17.539	15.566	20.176
<b>Men</b>	13.733	13.255	17.170	15.600	19.596
<b>Women</b>	14.722	11.912	17.609	15.560	20.286

**Table 8: Conflict styles – correlation to the client violence**

Pearson Correlation		Avoiding	Competing	Compromise	Accommodating	Collaborating
<b>OS CV</b>	Corr. coeff. Sig (2-tailed)	-0.094 0.127	0.011 0.864	-0.137 0.023*	-0.026 0.675	-0.003 0.967
<b>PV</b>	Corr. coeff. Sig (2-tailed)	-0.249 0.000**	0.051 0.394	-0.137 0.020*	-0.083 0.176	0.063 0.285
<b>VV</b>	Corr. coeff. Sig (2-tailed)	-0.061 0.301	0.002 0.978	-0.097 0.093	0.007 0.904	0.010 0.863

**Table 9: Assertiveness and cooperativeness index**

	Cooperativeness		Assertiveness	
	Mean	St. deviation	Mean	St. deviation
<b>Together</b>	8.943	6.352	2.078	6.176
<b>Men</b>	8.628	6.558	3.326	5.935
<b>Women</b>	9.137	6.323	1.807	6.239

**Table 10: Correlation of indices and total score of client violence**

Spearman's coefficient		Cooperativeness	Assertiveness
<b>CS</b>	Correlation coefficient	-0.053	-0.005
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.428	0.942





consequently we can point out that certain differences in assertiveness indexes have been found. However, the differences were not significant. Based on the results of the two extreme groups of respondents, we can conclude that no connection between indices and incidence of client violence was found.

The extreme groups are classified as groups of respondents, whose reached a total score of client violence was 1, i.e. respondents have never experienced any situation of client violence ( $n=27$ ), and respondents ( $n=27$ ), who reached the highest score of  $\geq 2.25$  (mean 2.871).

### Conclusion

Client violence in social service has not been thoroughly researched in Slovakia. The present survey is only the third one that the author has conducted within a five years period. On the basis of the achieved results, it is possible to state, that the problem of client violence in Slovakia exists, although its extent varies in comparison to the other countries. The research into client violence in the neighbouring countries was related to the medical sphere. Merecz, Drabek and Mosciska (2009) conducted a survey in Poland using a sample of 1.163 nurses and they found out, that 90 per cent of them experienced verbal violence from a patient and 2 per cent experienced physical aggression. The Czech studies focused on aggression in institutions for the mentally ill and psychiatric patients (Brožová, Vančura, 2010; Látalová, 2013) and showed, that the aggression has increased also in the entire healthcare sector (Pekara, 2013). The survey confirmed that respondents (80 per cent) experienced incidences of verbal violence in one of its forms. More than 40 per cent of the respondents experienced client-related physical threats.

It is interesting to compare and analyse the studies from different countries. Newhill's research (1996) showed that 87 per cent of the respondents were threatened by client violence. Macdonald and Sirotych (2001) stated that 87, 8 per cent of the respondents in Canada reported client-related verbal harassment at least once during their practice and 63, 5 per cent were threatened by physical violence. In the Shields and Kiser (2003) survey, 56 per cent of the respondents experienced threats

of violence from a client; Jayaratne, Croxton, Mattison (2004) found that 22 per cent of the respondents faced client-based threats, 49 per cent verbal violence; Ringstad's (2005) research in the USA found that 62.3 per cent of the respondents experienced mental aggression and 14.7 per cent experienced some form of physical aggression; Koritsas, Coles and Boyle (2010) stated that 57 per cent of the survey respondents were verbally attacked last year; Padyab, Ghazinour (2013) detected that more than 63 per cent of their respondents in Iran ( $n=390$ ) experienced client violence.

Criss (2010) in study that focused on the social work students in Florida found, that more than 41 per cent of the students experienced client violence and 37 per cent of them faced its verbal form. Savaya, Gardner, Stange (2011) detected that social work students in Israel experienced client violence and considered it to be the most problematic in critical situations, which can occur during the social worker's practice.

The results of the presented original survey here confirmed the incidence of verbal violence to a large extent; any extreme physical violence is of low incidence. However, the survey did not focus on the institutions specialized for work with mentally ill people and where physical attacks are relatively frequent. Therefore, the overall picture may differ in comparison to other studies.

In the long term perspective, the author deals with the issue, how certain victim's personal abilities are related to the incidence of client violence and what is its connection to the victim's anger perception and abilities with coping with aggression and conflict styles. This study demonstrates possible connections between conflict styles of respondents and the incidence of client violence. However, regarding the size of the research sample and the low incidence of physical forms of violence, it is impossible to talk about proving the correlation. The results show, that respondents use mostly collaborating as a conflict style. It is a very positive finding, seeing that collaborating as a conflict style allows achieving satisfactory and long-term conflict solutions, which are acceptable by both sides (Hocker, Wilmot, 2013).

It is uncertain to what extent the social suitability was manifested and whether the



questions were intentionally answered in the expected manner, which could have distorted the results. The survey does not show any clear link between the choice of conflict style and the incidence of client violence. Cooperativeness and assertiveness indices were also tested and it was detected, that respondents incline to cooperativeness rather than to assertiveness. Women incline to assertiveness less than men, but the difference is not statistically significant. Statistically significant distinction from the gender perspective was detected in competing as a conflict style, which is more often used by men. Compared with other surveys, Brahnam et al. (2005) conducted a survey on students of Midwestern University (USA) and detected differences in collaborating as a conflict style, which was preferred by women. The only difference was shown at the level  $p=0,0055$  and in avoiding, which was preferred by men at the level  $p=0,0305$ . Friedman et al. (2000) surveyed health care personnel and ascertained that the most common style is collaborating, avoiding and accommodating; competing was the least common style. The results are partially comparable in this aspect.

To sum up, we can assume that client violence in Slovakia does exist. Its forms vary depending on the type of institution and the target group the services are provided for. It is important to focus on certain specializations during the education of social workers as differences in certain fields are evident.

However, we can state that the correlation between the selection of the conflict style and the incidence of the client violence can exist, but more detailed research thereof is necessary. The results positively showed that the most frequent and the 'best' style is collaborating and it is important to train students in their career preparation phase to opt for this style.

Within social work it is necessary to involve in the study programme the subjects dealing with the issue of client violence. It is important to offer also to the experts in practice within their lifelong education, the possibility of courses and trainings prepared by empirical form, with the option of exercising the risk situation.

No less important is providing assistance to the victims of client violence and in general to emphasize more the area of self-care regarding

the workers in the social area, as a part of prevention, as well as a part of a more efficient way of controlling demanding situations which they often face daily.

Every part of social work has its risk target groups that is why targeted preparation of the experts is necessary for the work in the individual types of subjects providing services in the area of social work and social services.

Definitely, there is a need for determining the elementary safety rules which are mostly determined by the subjects themselves. Although the act n. 448/2008 on social services deals with the rights and obligations of the parties, within providing social services they are determined above all for the recipients of the services. In the supplement to the act n. 448/2008 the conditions of the quality of the social service provided the point 23.6 deals with the prevention of the crisis situation, however, in reality it is rarely possible for the particular institution to work out really good protection policies regarding the safety of the workers.

Therefore it would be appropriate, as the workplace has its supervisor, to determine people responsible for the area of labour safety. Those would assist the institution in working out certain safety standards with zero tolerance for violence and the particular procedures for the particular situations. Those must consider the needs of the individual types of subjects, their clients and their risks.

In future, it is necessary to analyse and to examine other factors, which could be related to client violence. Its prevention and especially its recognition are very important, seeing that aggressive clients will always exist in this sphere.

The legislation for solving situations of client violence is missing in Slovakia and practical workers are obliged to solve these situations individually. That means that every institution deals with client violence problems differently. It is necessary to thoroughly map the situation in Slovakia and to examine proposals for its real and possible (available) prevention together with the proposals for possible solutions in the near future.



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#### Notes

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# Analysis of the Regional Distribution of Social Services for Immigrants<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is in response to the increasing pro-integration role played by social services in the implementation of integration activities in areas of working with immigrants in the Czech Republic. The authors are looking for an answer to the question of whether the regional distribution of immigrant-specialised social services corresponds to the number of foreigners living in individual regions of the Czech Republic. The authors will try to conceptualise the relevant terms of the research issue, which involves immigrants in the Czech Republic and the immigrant-specialised social services. The authors found that even if the state and the regions (administrative units) provide social services which specialise in working with immigrants, they lack any systematic tools to monitor, at a minimum level, the distribution and coverage of the services with respect to the number of immigrants in any given locality. This may lead to serious regional problems in the availability and use of social services intended for immigrants.

## Keywords

social services, immigrants, integration of foreigners, regional distribution, availability of services





## Introduction

The Czech Republic (hereinafter abbreviated to “ČR”) has undergone dynamic changes over the past 25 years including significant social changes and increasing social problems for Czech citizens. Intensive socio-economic transformations induced by the transition from a socialist economic and social system to a capitalist one, accompanied by open access to the surrounding world and accession to international structures all gave rise to new processes and social risks which the Czech people were not able to handle all at once. One of these processes has been the gradual change in the social structure of society. One change in the social structure has been immigration. Immigration of foreign nationals into the territory of ČR<sup>4</sup> has become an obvious consequence of the country’s openness towards external influences and processes. The consequences of this process have resulted in some new and a few unpredictable social problems.

Whereas in 1990 the proportion of immigrants in the total population was only 0.3%, at present it is 4.2%. According to Eurostat (2012), the Czech Republic ranks alongside countries like the Netherlands (4%), Slovenia (4%) and Portugal (4.2%). The development of ČR, from a pre-1989 country of emigration to a present day country of destination for immigrants (Čermáková, 2010), brings forth challenges related to the changes to over-100-year old ethnic homogeneity and the relation to the homogenous population to the integration of migrants into the territory of ČR.

Since the early 1990s the effort of the state to form a basic framework for state-operated control over immigration, along with immigration policies which have taken integration into consideration has become more evident.

The formation of an integration policy in ČR has not been a high priority for a long time. Although some principles of an integration policy were formed, they would often remain under the auspices and area of competence of the relevant ministry. Any attempts to expand these principles usually failed, both at the level of central administrative bodies and the municipal level. This was undoubtedly due to a mixture of

detachment, perception of the issue as that of being of minor importance, public ignorance and a limited understanding of immigration (Topinka, 2013). The situation changed at the dawn of the millennium when the first integration conception was defined. Yet, another ten years elapsed before the integration policy goal was refined to read as follows: “to ensure the foreigner is independent and self-reliant, i.e. able to involve him/herself to a full extent in the life of society, to solve his/her individual life situations and that of the persons dependent on him/her. An integral specific part of the integration for the immigrant is to reach the position of having the ability of carrying out their activities without being dependent on other subjects or entities” (Czech Government, 2011). With the updated concept of foreigner integration, the importance of extending the policy increased. This policy is primarily important in the process of immigration and integration of immigrants, i.e. social policy, predominantly the system of social services. Social services aimed at providing “assistance and support to people for the purpose of their social inclusion or prevention of social exclusion” (ČR, 2006). The described goals of social services closely resemble those of the integration policy which may be a good starting point for direct work with immigrants. The importance of social services as a tool for an integration policy has been neglected for many years. It was the very conception of the integration of foreigners (2011) which encouraged the providers of various immigrant services to interconnect the social services and other activities within the integration of foreigners and to ensure this interconnection is carried out at the regional and local levels (Czech Government, 2011).

Since 2012, there has been a growing number of immigrant-specialised registered social services in different regions of ČR. The objective of this article is to map the distribution of these services and to answer the question: *“Does the regional distribution of the immigrant-specialised social services correspond to the number of foreigners living in the individual regions of the Czech Republic?”* In other words, are the social services evenly distributed across the Czech Republic or not, especially with respect to the presence of the immigrants in individual regions.



## Methodology

To find the answer to the aforementioned question, the research has been based on the definition of the characteristics of immigrants in the Czech regions and on the definition of immigrant-oriented social services. These issues are dealt with in the first two chapters. The study uses the findings described in literature, published research studies, as well as the evaluation of statistical and administrative data of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior. The third chapter brings the illustrations and interpretations of the social services distribution up for discussion.

The authors use the quantitative research strategy, drawing upon the processing of secondary data. The selection of appropriate methods and indicators uses the literature that is available that analyses the location of population and the availability of services (Duncan, Duncan, 1955; Ellis et al., 2004). The applied quantitative methods include: secondary data analysis – statistical data from the Czech statistical office and administrative data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic (MPSV) and the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (MVČR) – and their cartographic illustrations that are used for identification of the regional distribution of immigrants, and the divisions of immigrant-oriented social services in the Czech Republic's regions.

To identify the division of social services and distribution of immigrants in individual regions of the Czech Republic, the authors used the current administrative data of MPSV and MVČR. This data does not reflect the nature of consecutive migration streams, nor does it have any information about the properties of the services (actual capacity of the service, skills of the workers, methods of work with immigrants, etc.), nor does it indicate the immigrant's interest in the social services. The objective of the present article is to map out declared regional immigrant-oriented social services offered and to link the use of these services to the official numbers of immigrants in the regions of the Czech Republic.

## 1. Development of migration and characteristics of immigrants

The majority of migration theories suggest that “economic reasons are a strong stimulus for people to cross borders” (Rabušic, Burjanek, 2003: 14). Based on the data analysis, Horáková (2011) claims that the majority of immigrants within ČR are people who moved to this country firstly to find a job or to start a business. These people have created in ČR the conditions for their family members to follow them into moving to the CR on a more permanent basis (Uherek, 2010: 72). Apart from the immigrants motivated by economic or family reasons, a significant group is also made up of international students (Rákoczyová, Trbola, 2010).

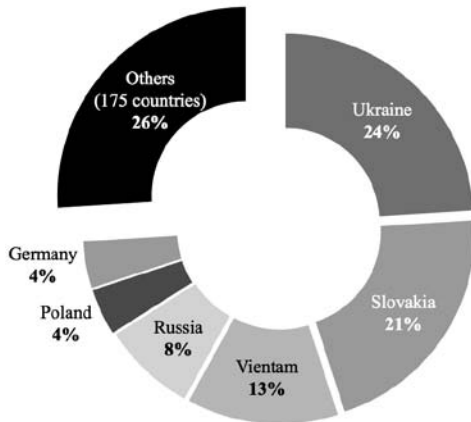
The migrating persons dealt with in the present article are not citizens of ČR. They were born in another country and their socialisation typically took place in different socio-cultural contexts. Upon their arrival in ČR the level of their integration into their new socio-cultural environment, that is often hardly understandable and comprehensible, is low. To put it simply, the more different the country of origin is (from the Euro-American cultural area based on the ancient Greek and Roman traditions and Christianity<sup>5</sup>), the lower the socio-cultural integration of the immigrant (integrated into a different social and cultural environment) within his/her new country.<sup>6</sup>

In ČR, immigrants have minority status<sup>7</sup>, pursuant to the meaning defined by Schaefer (2008), where they are a subordinate group with considerably smaller control over their lives, compared to the majority.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of the statistical data, it can be suggested that “a typical” foreigner comes from a non-EU country, usually from The Ukraine or Vietnam, is aged 30-34, male, who intends to stay for the long-term and lives in one of the larger cities (ČSÚ, 2011a). Yet, immigrants cannot be perceived as a homogenous group, one of the reasons is that their total number is formed by citizens of 181 countries. Immigrants from the Ukraine (24%), Slovakia (21%), Vietnam (13%), Russia (8%), Poland (4%) and Germany (4%) make up 74% of the immigrant population. The composition of these groups, as illustrated in Chart 1, has been more or less stable since the mid-1990s.



The remaining 26% of immigrants is made up of people from 175 countries. Among these, it is possible to find immigrants from Mongolia, Moldova, United States, Kazakhstan, China, Bulgaria, Belarus, Romania, Uzbekistan, India and Turkey.

**Chart 1: Illustration of the distribution of the largest groups of immigrants in ČR (as of 31 December 2013)**

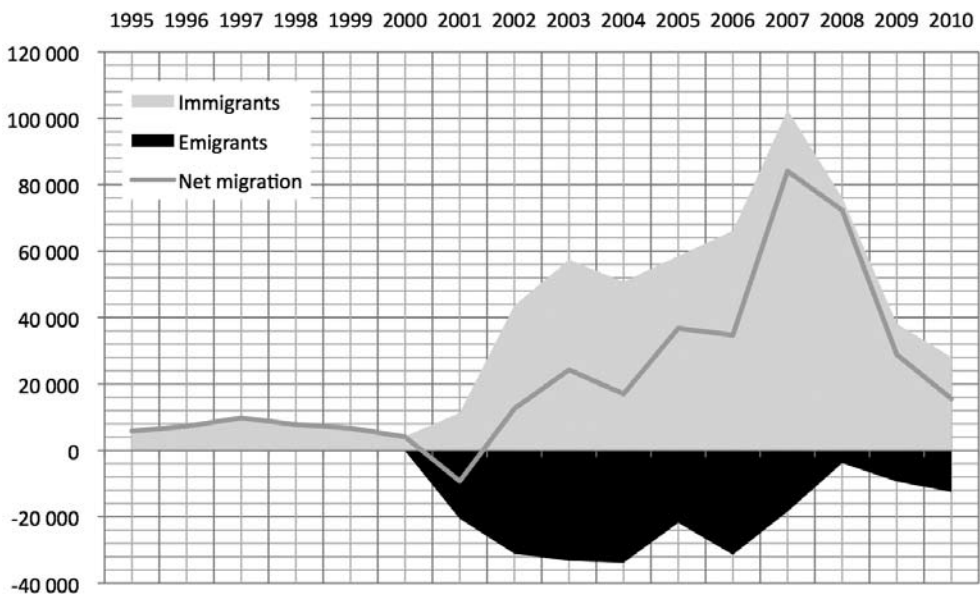


Source: MVČR (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic), 2014

Whereas in the 1980s the number of immigrants in the former Czechoslovakia was constant and the country's migration balance was negative, from 1990 on, the situation started to change, as illustrated in **Charts 2 and 3**. Since the early 1990s, the Czech Republic has shown an increasing positive migration balance, with the exception of the year 2001, when the consequences of restrictive legislative amendments to the residence permit became evident. The number of immigrants then fell again over the years 2009-10 primarily due to economic recession and its impact on the labour market.

The proportion of immigrants in Czech society constantly increased, from 0.3% in 1990 to 4.2% of the population towards the end of 2013. If the Czech Republic is compared to the Slovak Republic, i.e. the constituent states of the former federation, the increasing proportion of immigrants is obvious in both the countries but the figure in the Czech Republic is roughly three times greater than in Slovakia (4.2% vs. 1.3%).

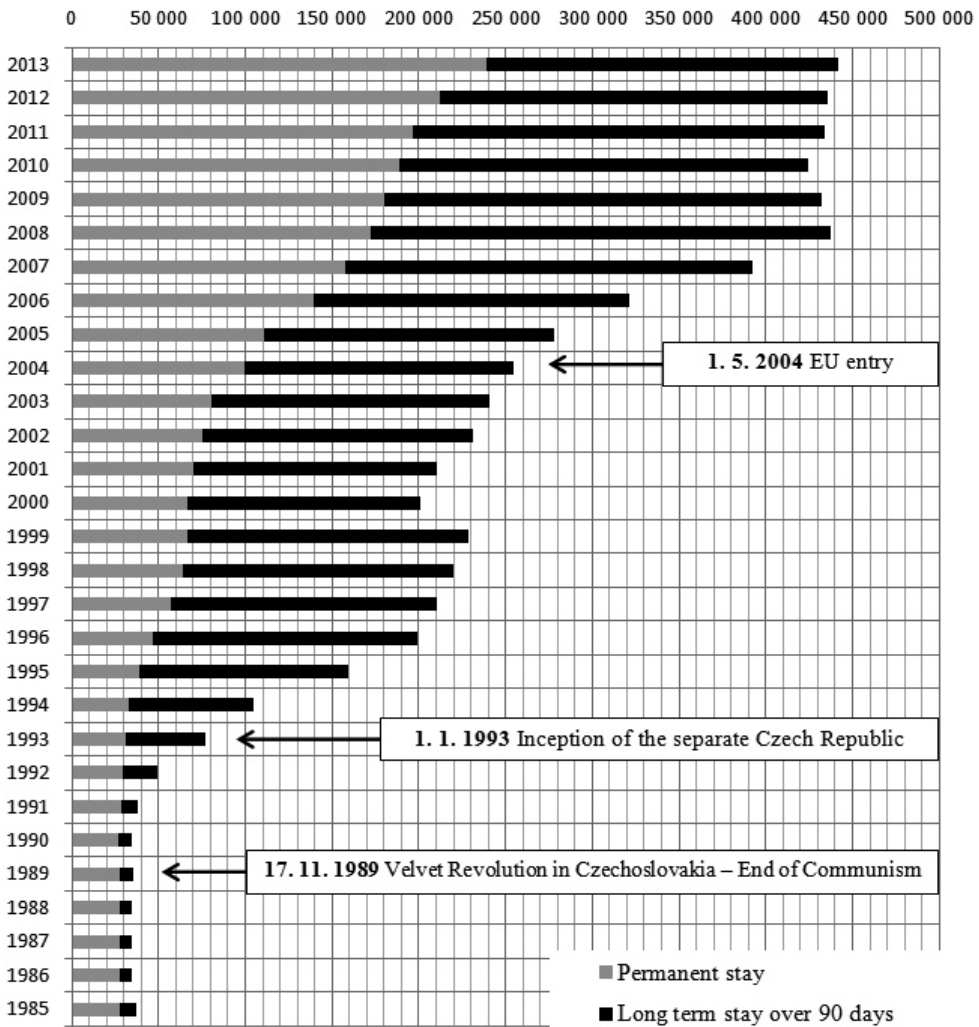
**Chart 2: Foreigners moving to/from abroad over the years 1995 to 2010**



Source: ČSÚ (Czech Statistical Office), 2011b



Chart 3: Numbers of foreigners by type of their residence over the years 1985 to 2013



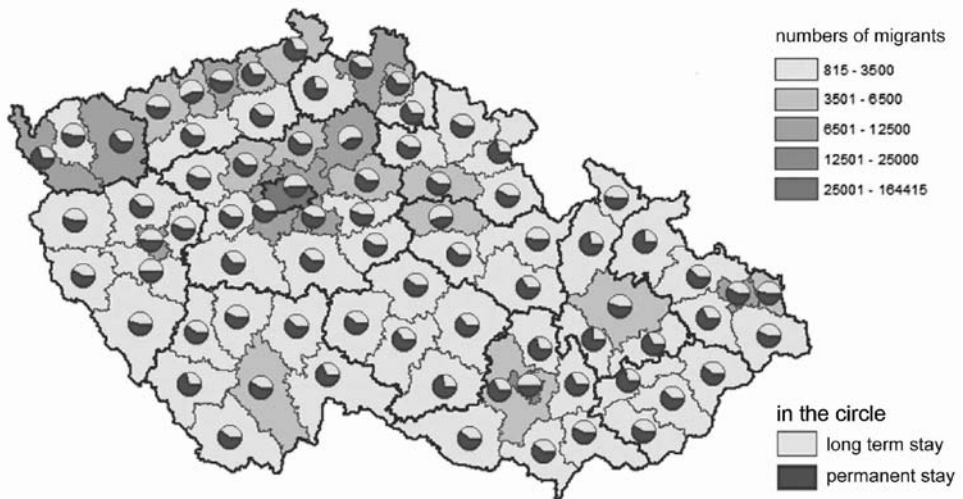
Source: ČSÚ (Czech Statistical Office) (2014); MVČR (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic) (2014)

Similar to the situation in other European countries, the vast majority of immigrants tend to settle in the capital city and on its outskirts (see Figure 1). Unlike in the metropolitan areas of Western Europe, immigrants in the Czech Republic do not form separate neighbourhoods (Drbohlav, 2010; Čermáková, 2010) whose dimensions were defined in an American context by Massey and Denton (1988), and empirically explored by Borjas (1998). Yet, the spatial distribution of immigrants in ČR varies

and there are enormous differences between the regions (Čermáková, 2010). There is a decreasing trend in the number of immigrants in the west-to-east and north-to-south directions and a predominant concentration of immigrants is found in Prague and other large cities. The immigrants from the developed Western countries are mostly concentrated in Prague, whereas the Vietnamese immigrants live throughout the country, with increased concentrations in frontier areas and along



**Figure 1: Number of immigrants in the Czech districts**



Source: Register (2014)

important transport routes. Russians living in Prague and Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) are highly concentrated, but there are no significant areas settled by those immigrants in the Czech Republic, with the exception of the Carlsbad City and Libuš, the municipal district of Prague.

## 2. Social services provided to immigrants

As shown by the data above, the state, through its labour market, liberal approach and sense of freedom, gradually has become a popular destination for immigrants. Initially, the character of the migration had been transit, but the number of immigrants who decide to stay longer in the country was gradually growing. In the course of time, state migration policies, followed by integration policies, were formed under the influence of the varying character and composition of the immigrants. At the same time as the integration policy was established and gradually amended, another important social policy system started to be formed in the post-Communist Czech Republic - social services. The centralised, state-controlled concept of the Communist era was gradually replaced by the emphasis on local decision-making on the level of regions and individual municipalities. The major idea behind the social services reform in the Czech Republic was probably the Czech-

British project titled “*Support of MPSV in the reform of social services*” primarily the output of the project *White Book in Social Services*, which introduced new elements and ideas into the field of social services (MPSV, 2003):

- support of independence and autonomy of people on one hand; support of their own need to take responsibility on the other;
- support of the integration of people into local communities;
- unsatisfied needs of people as a prerequisite for the provision of social services;
- social services should grow and develop under the assistance of functioning relationships between the individuals, groups and communities, municipalities, regions, civil society and the state;
- standardisation of the minimum quality of social services and their activities;
- non-discrimination in the access to social services and their provision;
- municipalities as a key to the provision of services, regions as coordinators, and the state as a controller and creator of a political framework.

The aforementioned elements of the White Book were legitimised by virtue of Act No. 108/2006 Sb. on social services, its statutory instruments and subsequent amendments.





The aforementioned elements indicate the basic changes in the framework of social services reform which started with the transformation of Czech society after the so-called “Velvet Revolution” in 1989. The centralised determination of social service clients needs has been gradually eradicated. With the introduction of several entities which would legitimately provide social services (private persons, non-profit organisations, regions and their semi-budgetary organisations, enterprises), the idea of one single provider (the state) was gradually abandoned. Primarily the newly established or renewed non-governmental non-profit organisations transferred their international experience thereby encouraging the extension of the portfolio of social services offered (e.g. outreach services as an alternative to the residential social services). With the introduction of the attendance allowance the reform has also caused a change in the areas of finance; more focused on seniors, disabled people etc; where people themselves contribute to the payments of the so-called social care services. As well as social care services, the areas of social preventative measures and social counselling also emerged as part of the service offered by Social services.

### **Social services for immigrants**

As a detailed description of the social service system in ČR has been brought forth by Havlíková a Kubalčíková (2014), this article will focus directly on the provision of services to immigrants. Pursuant to Section 4 of Act No. 108/2006 Sb., social services can be used by any foreigner who has been granted permanent residence status and his/her relatives having the long-term residence permit. In addition, the services may be used by a foreigner with the status of long-term resident of the EU in the territory of another EU member country. Other beneficiaries include a relative of a Czech citizen with a temporary residence permit, a foreigner who has been granted a long-term residence permit in the Czech Republic for the purpose of scientific research or for jobs requiring highly professional qualifications, and, last but not least, a person who has been granted international protection in the form of additional protection or a foreigner without permanent residence permit in ČR who is

entitled to receive the same on the basis of international treaties that are incorporated into the Czech legislation.

It is evident from the above indicated list of beneficiaries that the criteria for immigration have narrowed so as to integrate those immigrants in the society, whose integration is in the interest of the Czech Republic (scientists, skilled workers, relatives of Czech citizens and so on.); another issue that must be considered is the immigrant's contribution to the transfer of money through his/her participation into the social security system (“foreigners with permanent residence”).

Social services in the Czech Republic are divided into social care services, social prevention and social counselling services. The social care services are mainly used to compensate for handicaps resulting from injury, disease or old age, and their statutory definition is entirely of a special pedagogical nature. Social counselling is a service, which aim is to make an individual well informed about society by means of a) mediating contact with the social environment, b) socially therapeutic activities, and c) assistance in the exertion of rights, legitimate claims and in the handling of personal issues. Social counselling is available in citizens' advisory centres, marriage guidance centres and family guidance centres, advisory centres for seniors, for disabled persons, and for victims of crime and domestic violence.

Section 53 of the aforementioned Act defines the social prevention services as follows:

*“(the services) help prevent the social exclusion of persons who are endangered by such exclusion due to their critical social situation, habits and way of life leading to a conflict with society, a socially disadvantaged environment and jeopardy to rights and legitimate claims by criminal acts of other individuals. The goal of the social prevention services is to help the persons to overcome their unfavourable social situation and protect society against the emergence and propagation of adverse social phenomena. (ČR, 2006)*

As implied by the aforementioned characteristics of social services in ČR, the social care services





may be used by the immigrants in the case of disease, old age, injury, etc. Social counselling is available to the immigrants within the framework of the above indicated organisations where the immigrants are one of the target groups. There are specialised organisations whose primary task is to provide counselling to immigrants (see below).

Social prevention services are primarily used for the protection of Czech society against *adverse social phenomena*. The first chapter shows the significant and quite stable ethnic homogeneity of ČR, therefore it can be concluded that social prevention services are primarily used for the protection of the *majority of society* in the territory of ČR.

#### Chart 4: Social services provided to foreigners - basic division

Source: Register (2014)

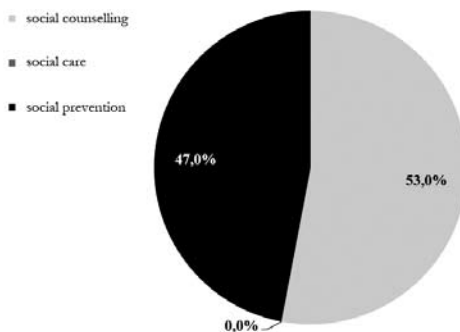


Chart 4 shows the distribution of services provided to foreigners. As of 30 April 2014, there were 134 social services registered in the Czech Republic the target group of which are - inter alia - immigrants.<sup>9</sup> More than half of the social services intended for immigrants are formed by social counselling (53%); social prevention services account for less than a half (47%) and social care services are not offered to immigrants according to data recorded by individual providers.

Chart 5 gives a detailed view of the structure of social services which are currently available to immigrants in the territory of ČR. In addition to the aforementioned predominant social counselling a whole range of social prevention services is available. Of the total number of

services provided to immigrants, the social prevention accounts for the following:

- **0.7% drop-in centres** – low-threshold facilities providing non-residential and/or outreach services to persons exposed to substance dependence;
- **0.7% social activation services for senior citizens and people with disabilities** - non-residential, and/or outreach services provided to people at retirement age or people with disabilities exposed to social exclusion;
- **2.2% crisis assistance** – outreach, non-residential or residential services for an interim period, provided to people in a life-threatening or health-threatening situation who are temporarily unable to manage their adverse social situation on their own.
- **2.2% halfway house** – residential services typically intended for persons up to 26 years of age who, upon coming of age, leave children's homes and secure homes for young offenders or sometimes other types of institutional facilities for children and youth care, and for persons who have been discharged from prison or a mental institution (involuntary incarceration);
- **2% low-threshold facilities for children and youth** – provide non-residential and/or outreach services to children aged between 6 and 26 who are exposed to adverse social phenomena. The goal of the service is to improve the quality of a person's life by preventing or mitigating the social and health risks associated with their life style, to allow the children to orient themselves better in their social environment and to establish the proper conditions to manage their unfavourable social situation.
- **4.5% shelter houses** – provide temporary accommodation to persons in unfavourable social situations resulting from or associated with the loss of housing;
- **6% crisis hotline** – outreach service for an interim period, provided to people in a life-threatening or health-threatening situation or another serious situation which they are temporarily unable to resolve on their own.
- **7.5% social activation services for families with children** – outreach and/or non-residential services provided to families with children whose development is at risk due



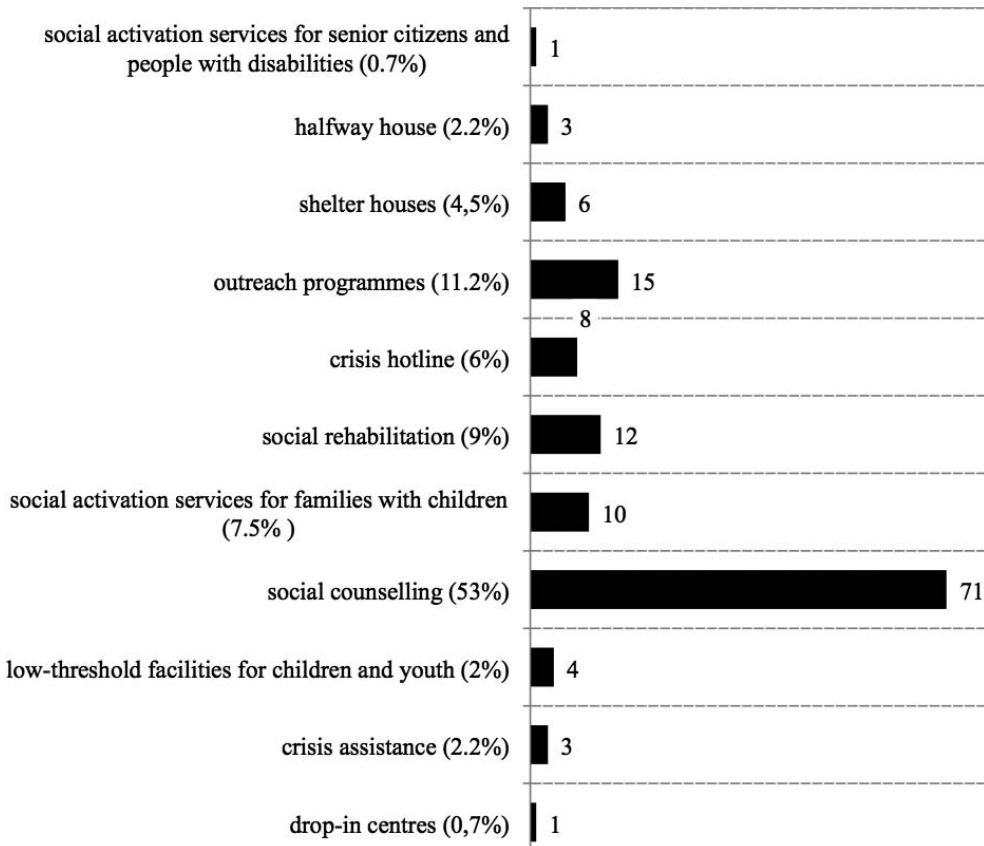
to the effects of a long-term critical social situation where the parents are unable to resolve problem situations on their own and where there are further risks threatening the children's development;

- **9% social rehabilitation** – a set of specific activities focused on attaining self-reliance, independence and self-sufficiency by using a client's abilities, potential and competence and developing their specific abilities and skills, strengthening their habits and the practising of everyday activities necessary for leading an independent life.
- **11.2% outreach programmes** – these are programmes for people who lead risky life styles or are directly at threat due to this life style. The service is intended for problematic groups of people, such as substance or psychotropic drug abusers, people without

any shelter or accommodation, those living in socially excluded communities and other groups at social risk. The objective is to evaluate these people and to minimise the risks resulting from their life style.

An accurate portrayal of social services provided to immigrants is quite misleading as many services have a wide and varied range of target groups registered, including a diverse selection of immigrant group. In the analysis, we focus on those services, which directly specialise in working with foreigners. In fact, we assume that the specific work with foreigners requires specifically trained experts with the corresponding qualifications and specialists in various fields (e.g. interpreters or lawyers). Also, we excluded those services, which should be provided within their fields of work, but are actually not. To identify the social services that

Chart 5: Social services provided to foreigners – sorted by individual services



Source: Register (2014)



**Table 1: Number of social services, based on their orientation towards foreigners**

Social services	Foreigners as one of two target groups of the service	Foreigners as one of five target groups of the service	Foreigners as one of six and more target groups of the service
social counselling	17	9	45
drop-in centre	0	0	1
crisis assistance	0	0	3
low-threshold facility for children and youth	0	1	3
social activation services for families with children	2	6	2
social rehabilitation	0	3	9
crisis hotline	0	0	8
outreach programmes	4	6	5
sheltered housing	1	0	5
halfway house	0	2	1
social activation services for senior citizens and people with disabilities	0	0	1

Source: Register (2014)

are targeted by their providers directly to the work with immigrants, the following Table 1 has been created.

Table 1 presents the targets of individual social services. The first column indicates the numbers of registered social services with their target group being immigrants (or “immigrants

and asylum seekers”) which are one of the two target groups of the relevant service. The second column indicates the number of services aimed at immigrants, being one of five target groups of the relevant service. The third column gives the remaining services where immigrants are one of many target groups.

**Table 2: Share of the immigrant-oriented social services in the total number of services, which refer to citizens as one of the target groups**

Social services	Immigrant-oriented social services	Social services not oriented towards immigrants	Proportion of the oriented services in the total number of services within the category
social counselling	26	45	37%
drop-in centre	0	1	0%
crisis assistance	0	3	0%
low-threshold facilities for children and youth	1	3	25%
social activation services for families with children	8	2	80%
social rehabilitation	3	9	25%
crisis hotline	0	8	0%
outreach programmes	10	5	67%
sheltered housing	1	5	17%
halfway house	2	1	67%
social activation services for senior citizens and people with disabilities	0	1	0%

Source: Register (2014, authors' calculations)



The immigrant-oriented social service providers have mostly identified their target group from a few partial, related groups (e.g. immigrants and asylum seekers, ethnic minorities or persons exposed to social exclusion, etc.). Hereinafter, the term “immigrant-oriented services” will only refer to those services where immigrants are one of five target groups. Apart from the targeted social services, there are services with a registered long list of potential target groups which are provided these services. For details, see Table 2. A typical example of a social service with a broad target group is social counselling. Although social counselling accounts for 53% of all the registered social services offered to immigrants (see Chart 5), the proportion of counselling directly aimed at immigrants is only 37%.

**3. Distribution of immigrant-oriented social services**

The intention of the article is to answer the following question: *“Does the regional distribution of the immigrant-specialised social services correspond to the number of foreigners living in the individual regions of the Czech*

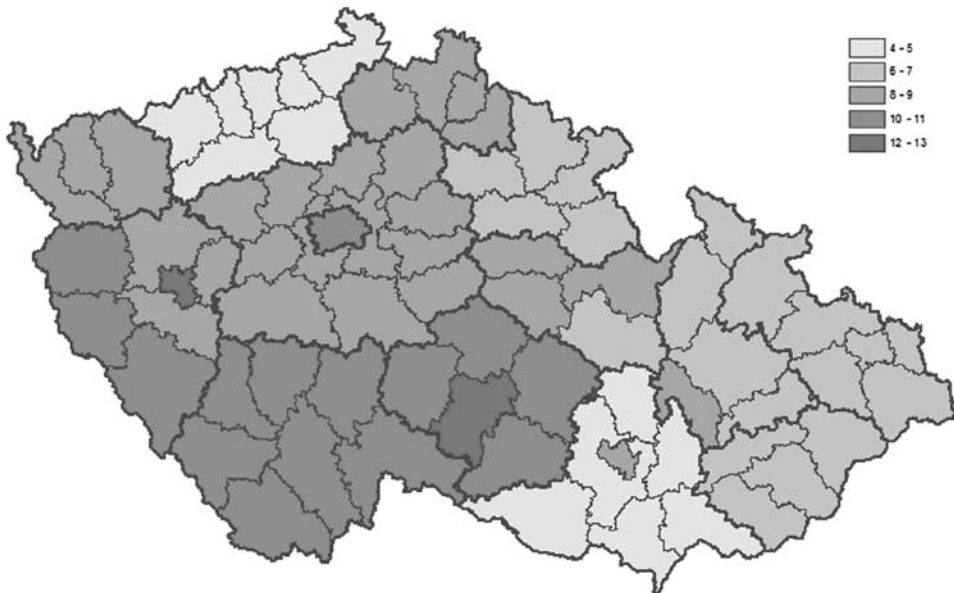
*Republic?”* This chapter offers answers to this question and submits them for discussion.

**3.1. Distribution of social services**

Although the state and regions (administrative units) provide social services which are orientated towards immigrants, our analysis shows that they fail to distribute evenly these services in the regions. This may lead to serious regional differences in the availability of social services (see the following item 3.2).The following three maps illustrate one example where the distribution of all social services is aimed primarily at immigrants; the other two examples show the distribution of specialised social activation services for families with children, and outreach programmes.

**Figure 2** shows the uneven distribution of services throughout the Czech Republic. The most evident is the higher occurrence of services in the southern and central parts of Bohemia. On the contrary, the fewest targeted social services are found in many districts of the Ústí nad Labem Region and the South Moravian Region. Relatively few targeted services are

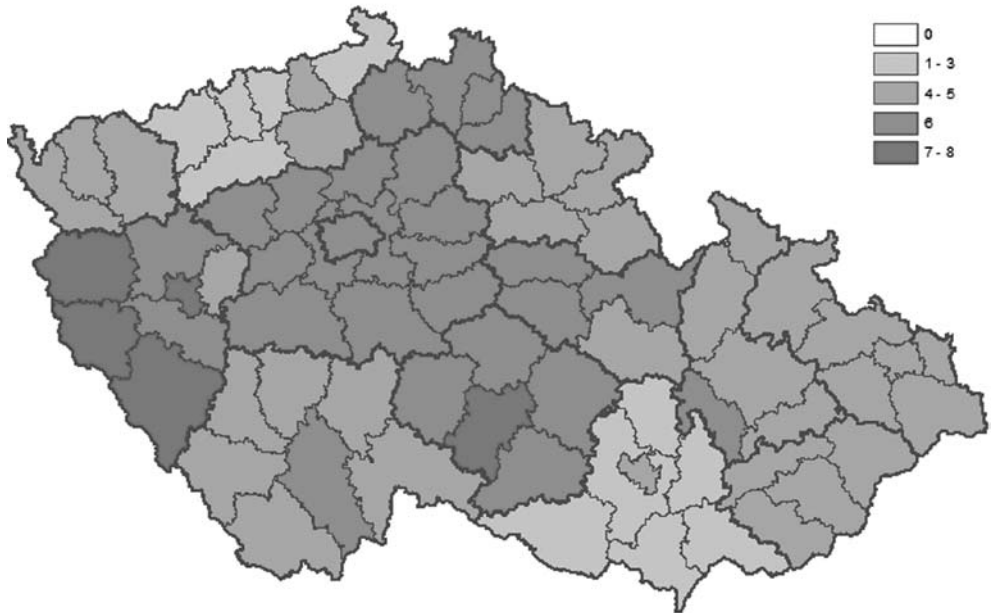
**Figure 2: Regional distribution of all immigrant-targeted social services**



Source: Register (2014)



**Figure 3: Distribution of professional social counselling aimed at immigrants.**



Source: Register (2014)

found in the Moravian districts in the eastern and northern parts of the country.

Further in this article, the authors present the location of selected social services, particularly those which are predominantly aimed at immigrants. These services include: social counselling, social activation services for families with children, and outreach programmes.

**Figure 3** indicates the distribution of professional social counselling for immigrants. The counselling is provided for the most part in the Plzeň Region and the Vysočina Region. Here, it shows a considerable concentration in the western part of the country, whereas the easternmost parts of the country have the smallest number of counselling services. For the distribution of social activation services for families with children, see **Figure 4**. These services are available in all regions of ČR at least to a minimum degree. A higher occurrence of the services is in Prague and Brno and particularly in all the districts of the South Bohemian Region. **Figure 5** clearly shows that outreach programmes are unevenly distributed across ČR. This social service is primarily

missing in the districts of the northern parts of Bohemia and southern part of Moravia.

Although in the field of integration and social policy the provision of services is proclaimed to take place at the regional and local level, corresponding to the locally defined problems, specialised social services aimed at immigrants are not evenly distributed across the regions, not even to a minimum degree. The outreach programmes are completely missing in some localities even if these localities demonstrate a considerable numbers of immigrants, as illustrated in Figure 1 above. Concurrently, the analysis confirmed an increased number of specialised social services in regions where the number of immigrants was relatively small (e.g. the districts of Jihlava, Tachov, Domažlice, Klatovy, Ústí nad Orlicí, Chrudim, Česká lípa, Prostějov).

### 3.2. Spatial distribution of immigrants vs. regional distribution of social services

Another issue explored in the present article is the correlation between the distribution of immigrants and the regional distribution of immigrant-oriented services. *The authors*

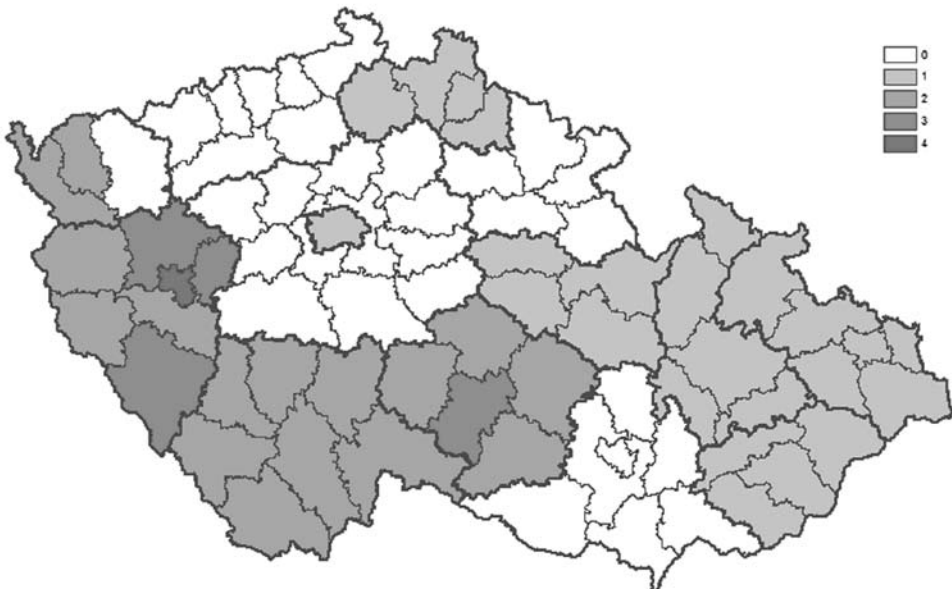


**Figure 4: Regional distribution of social activation services for families with children targeted at immigrants**



Source: Register (2014)

**Figure 5: Regional distribution of outreach programmes targeted at immigrants**

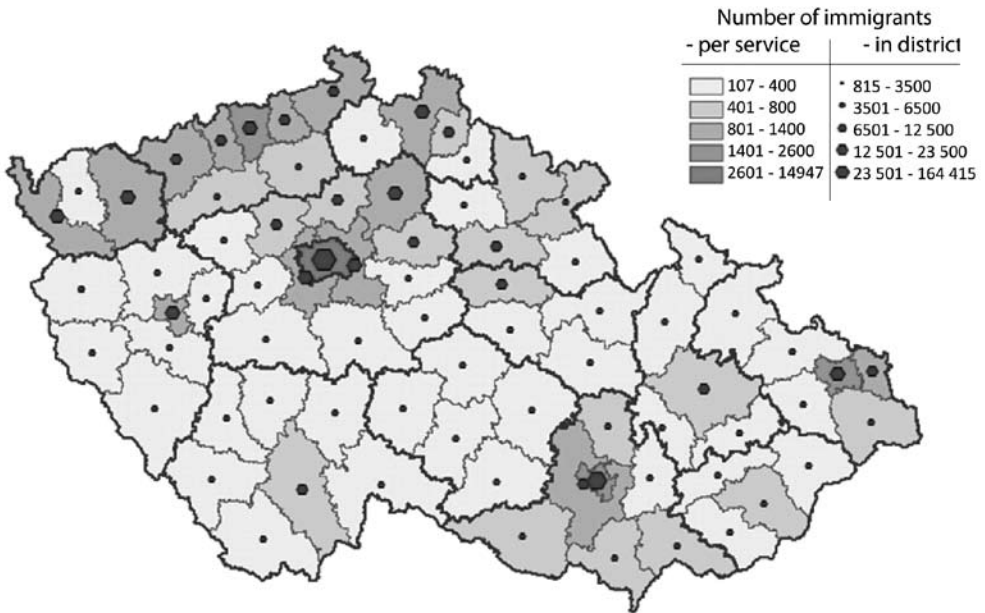


Source: Register (2014)





**Figure 6: Regional availability of all immigrant-targeted social services**



Source: Register (2014)

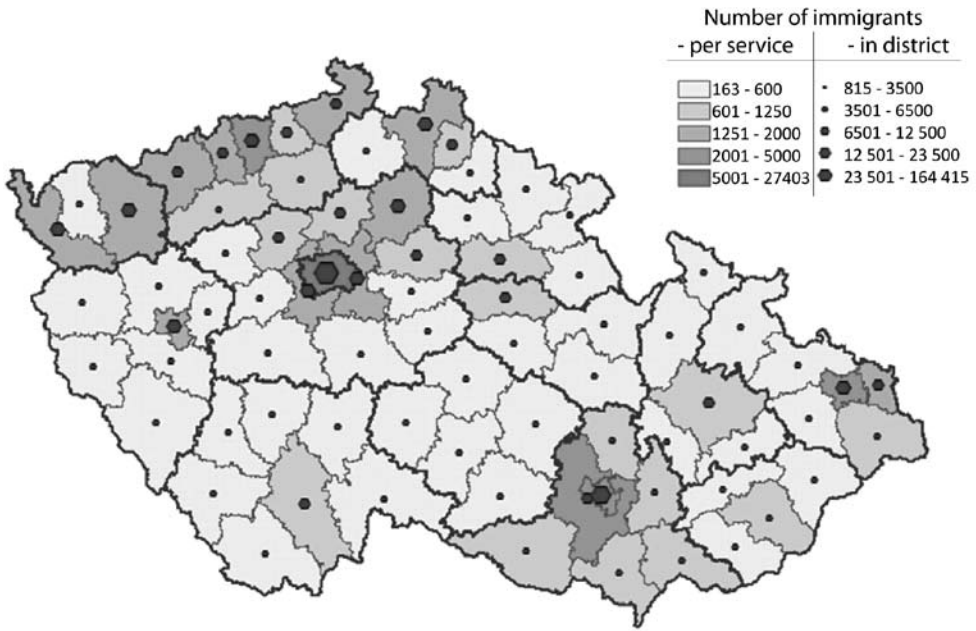
*always indicate the number of immigrants allotted to one social service, sorted by districts. The white spaces indicate the localities where there is no service offered, whereas the darkest spaces indicate the localities with the greatest potential number of immigrants per service. The smaller the number of immigrants per one service is, the lighter the relevant locality is, and it is considered as *more available and accessible to immigrants*. One of the limitations of the analysis, which should be mentioned, includes the difficulty in determining the actual volume of offered services. It is a consequence of the inaccurate methods of reporting the services in the Register (2014), which is varied and lacks an integrated methodology. Instructions for filling in data about clients and service capacities are missing. As a result, the data cannot be analysed correctly. Therefore, we have worked with a social service unit and immigrants, who get only one service, not a selection. Despite that, we get an interesting view of the irregularity of the spatial distribution, and thus a possible service load within the state.*

**Figure 6** clearly shows that the targeted social services are offered throughout the country. The services are concentrated mostly in Prague and its vicinity, and - generally speaking - in northern parts of Bohemia, specifically the border districts of Bohemia, as well as the South Moravian Region, Brno and its vicinity and northern Moravia. The same applies to the districts of the regional capital cities (such as Plzeň, České Budějovice, Olomouc, Zlín, etc.).

The distribution of professional social counselling aimed at immigrants (**Figure 7**) follows the distribution of all targeted social services to a considerable extent. It is evident that the concentration of services is potentially high in Prague and its vicinity, in the districts of northern Bohemia, especially border districts. The concentration of the services is also high in the districts of South Moravian and Moravian-Silesian Region. The map also illustrates the presence of the services in some regional towns.

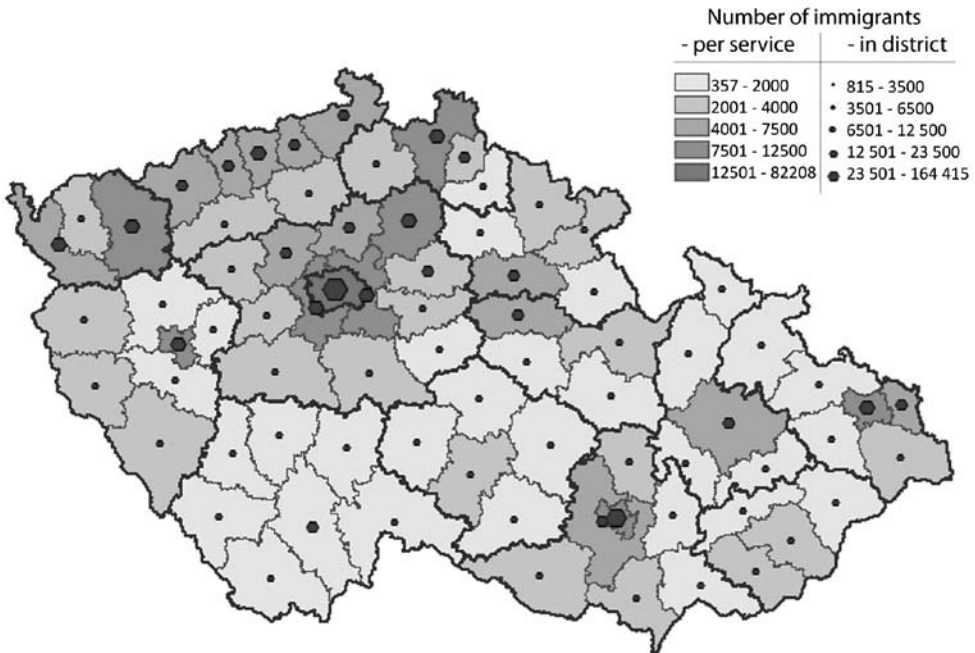


Figure 7: Regional availability of professional social counselling aimed at immigrants



Source: Register (2014)

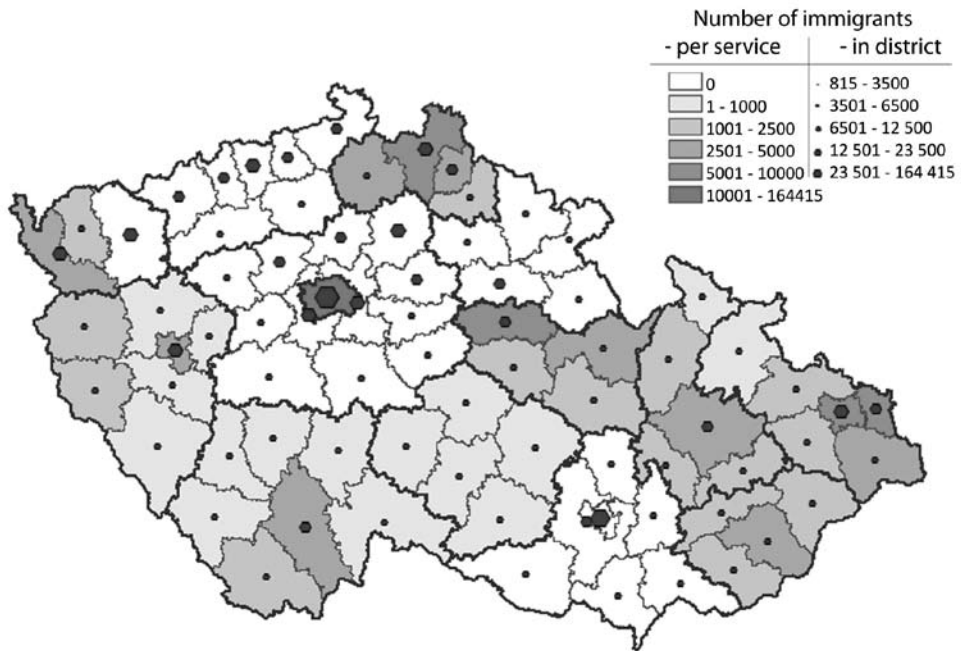
Figure 8: Social activation services for families with children and their regional availability for immigrants



Source: Register (2014)



**Figure 9: Regional availability of outreach programmes for immigrants**



Source: Register (2014)

According to Figure 8, the regional distribution of social activation services for families with children is extremely uneven. The heaviest potential load of the service has been recorded in Prague districts and on the outskirts of Prague, the border districts of northern Bohemia and in districts with regional towns (Liberec, Brno, Ostrava, Plzeň, Karlovy Vary, Hradec Králové). The services may be exposed to the “greatest possible load” here.

The distribution of outreach programmes also shows considerable regional differences. In some regions, the service is completely absent and - as such - not provided to immigrants at all. The greatest potential load has been identified in Prague districts, the districts of the Karlovy Vary Region, the Liberec Region and the strip of districts running from southern Bohemia through central Moravia and northern Moravia. At the same time, field programmes represent a rather crucial social service, especially with regard to identification and handling of social problems within more enclosed and isolated groups of immigrants. Figure 9 shows that places with a high rate of concentration of foreigners are problematic in this respect – absence of field

programmes in Brno; excessive loads in Prague. In many districts of the central part of Bohemia and southern Moravia, there are no field programmes in place. On the other hand, the example of the Vysočina region shows a better balance between the number of foreigners and the presence of field programmes across districts.

As indicated in Item 3.1, the potential availability of the selected services varies enormously depending on the region and it does not reflect the number of immigrants in the relevant locality. Regions with a higher number of immigrants tend to have fewer available services than those with a smaller number of immigrants. This fact also influences the opportunity to establish regional platforms for cooperation, as proclaimed by both the policies<sup>10</sup>. Organisations and services which should cooperate with each other, share their know-how and systematically resolve the local problems in a given locality, do not do so, and they actually compete with each other for the limited resources and clients.



## Conclusion

The present article reflects the fact that the Czech Republic has slowly become a country for immigration. This situation has brought forth some new and often unexpected social problems. The solution to these problems mostly consists of an efficient setting of immigration and integration policies alongside the co-operation of social services. To fulfil their pro-integration role and to support the integration of immigrants into society, these services have to comply with one of the most crucial requirements - to be available to the immigrants in the relevant regions. That was the reason why the authors focused on the evaluation of the situation, and monitored the regional distribution of the immigrant-specialised social services and examined whether the distribution of services corresponds to the number of foreigners living in the individual regions of the Czech Republic. The authors were interested in whether the social services are available to their potential users at the district level. The authors used secondary data from which they compiled a framework image of the social services distribution, working within the category of the so-called targeted services. Although the state and regions provide social services which specialise in immigrants, they do not follow and provide coverage, which would be evenly distributed over a region, and any optimum distribution of services. This may lead to serious regional problems in the availability of social services intended for immigrants.

As for the distribution of targeted services, it is clear that although they can be found all over the territory of the state, the highest concentration of such service is in Prague and its vicinity, and generally also in northern Bohemia, especially in border districts, as well as in the South Bohemian Region, in Brno and its vicinity and in the north of Moravia. The same applies to districts containing some regional towns (Plzeň, České Budějovice, Olomouc, Zlín etc.). The view of individual services shows that the distribution of specialised social counselling focused on immigrants follows the distribution of all targeted social services to a considerable extent. The unevenness can be seen in the regional distribution of social activation services for families with children. The heaviest potential

load on the service has been recorded in Prague districts and on the outskirts of Prague, the border districts of northern Bohemia and in districts with regional towns. In many districts of the central part of Bohemia and southern Moravia, there are no field programmes in place. As a result, there are places with limited social service provision, which applies also to places with a high concentration of foreigners showing high proportions of foreigners allotted to one social service, and signalling a possible excessive load on the social services.

As demonstrated, social services need to be systematised in order to fulfil the requirements for their regional and local availability. A large number of services are available only with difficulty, which is relatively critical in the services of the outreach programmes and in social activation services for families with children, both of which have considerable integration potential. The potential availability of the selected services varies enormously depending on the region and it does not reflect the number of immigrants in the relevant locality. Regions with a higher number of immigrants tend to have fewer available services than those with a smaller number of immigrants. In this context, it would be advisable to design a map of services more conceptually instead of the current situation where the services emerge more or less randomly, in some locations they compete with one another, whereas in other localities they are entirely absent, all of which happens irrespective of the actual occurrence of immigrants, their needs and their location. If we consider that the social work focuses on problems in the interaction between an immigrant and his/her social environment, we can perceive the social services as one of the suitable tools of solving interaction problems. In order to make the social work in the segment of social services potentially available, the regions, in which foreigners stay, study, work and live, should be covered by the immigrant-oriented social services at least at a minimum level. Our analysis showed that immigrant-oriented social services are not evenly distributed, the "white areas" as well as places signalling a considerable work-load on services being most alarming. In case of Brno and Prague, the myth of the sufficiency of the network of social services for



foreigners was torn down. The failure to consider the requirements of an even distribution of services poses risks to society, whether in the form of the strengthening of the process of the isolation of immigrant communities, which create parallel structures in society, or the failure to handle problems early especially on the regional level.

In the introduction, the reader was informed of the methodological limits of the present analysis, which describes the distribution of the immigrant-oriented social services and is related to the number of immigrants in the regions of the Czech Republic. In addition, we did not determine the actual capacities of social services. The presence of the services does not reflect its actual use and facilities. This is due to the inaccurate method of keeping information about services. Obtaining comparable data about individual capacities is a challenge for further research. In this respect, we recommend unifying the method of reporting data about the services so that they can be compared in the future. The results of this study cannot be applied to the real interests of immigrants in conjunction with social services. This would and should be examined through a qualitative research strategy. Yet, the present results may be used for local, regional and nationwide decision making about the possible optimisation of the immigrant-oriented services. Local, regional and national governments and professional associations should set the optimal ratios of immigrants to the specialised social services in the individual regions from the perspective of the desired state. In this way, they – as the responsible providers of social services – could also plan and thus control the provision of specialised social services to immigrants.

To finish, we present recommendations for further research, the results of which could be used for social work practice. On the quality level, it would be appropriate to monitor strategies of handling problematic situations of specific groups of foreigners in various places, the impact of barriers upon foreigners' access to services (e.g. ethnical networks) and the possibilities and limitations of community methods of handling problems of foreigners in regions. On the quantity level, it is a great challenge to record regional differences in

the availability of services for foreigners (not just social ones), especially the actual use of the services and their capacities, as well as the operation of networks of the services in regions.

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#### Notes

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- 4 In the context of ČR, the foreign nationals living legally in the territory of ČR are referred to by two different terms: the legislation applies the term “foreigner”, whereas the reference literature speaks of “immigrant”. In this study, the authors will use the term “immigrant”, whereas the term “foreigner” will only be used if required so or related to the corresponding legislation or a referenced work. The study is exclusively focused on immigrants who live in the Czech Republic permanently or on a long term basis (for more than 90 days).
- 5 The Euro-American cultural area is “relatively young (...) cultural environment based on the ancient-Christian tradition” (Pavelka, Pospíšil, 1993: 98).
- 6 For more information, see the socialisation





- and institutionalisation (Berger and Luckmann, 1999).
- 7 They do not enjoy the status of a national minority because this minority is defined by legislation as follows: “a community of the Czech citizens living in the territory of the present Czech Republic who differs from the other citizens typically by a common ethnic origin, language, culture or tradition, who form a minority population and concurrently express their will to be considered a national minority for the purpose of their joint effort to maintain and develop their own selfhood, language and culture, and for the purpose of expressing and protecting the interests of their community formed in the history.” (ČR, 2001). Throughout the present article, the authors focus on the groups of immigrants who are holders of a permanent or long-term residence
- 8 title (over 90 days) in the territory of ČR. Schaefer (2008) characterises the minority through specific marks as people who: 1) differ from the predominant group in their physical or cultural marks; 2) have experience of prejudiced approach on the part of the majority and of disadvantages; 3) whose membership of the minority is not voluntary; 4) feel solidarity with other members of the same group; 5) whose marriages often take place between the members of the same group.
- 9 The exact name of the target group is “immigrants and asylum seekers”
- 10 The integration policy (Czech Government, 2011) defines the regional advisory platforms of organisations working with immigrants. The social service policy (ČR, 2006) asks the organisations to cooperate through the social service quality standards.



# Situation of Single Grandmothers with a Child in Substitute Family Care in Asylum Houses in the Moravian-Silesian Region

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## Abstract

This article aims to describe and analyse the situation of single grandmothers in asylum houses for mothers with children in the Moravian-Silesian Region. The first part of the text is devoted to the description of the situation of single mothers in the Czech Republic. Later the methodological anchoring of the research will be presented. The research consists of quantitative and qualitative parts. The quantitative section refers to the frequency of grandmothers with a child in care in individual districts of the Moravian-Silesian Region. The results were measured by means of structured interviews with social workers from various asylum houses. The qualitative part is focused on the analysis of the factors that led the grandmothers to being in an asylum house. This section was based on interviews with three communication partners, i.e. grandmothers with a child in care in asylum houses in the Moravian-Silesian Region. In this research, the author aimed to obtain information useful for the development of social work for those working with this target group.

## Keywords

single mother, substitute family care, grandmother, asylum house, grounded theory



### **Situation of Single Mothers in the Czech Republic**

Single mothers as a group tend to be commonly homogenized in publications and research articles. However, the experience of lone motherhood can be very different, depending on life circumstances that led to becoming a single parent. A substitute family care is one of the ways that can result in becoming a single parent. This article focuses on a kinship substitute family care which is preferred by courts to be in the best interest of the child. At the same time, the kinship substitute family care is very often carried out by the children's grandmothers. If these grandmothers live alone, they become substitute single mothers.

To put the forms of substitute family care into the complex theoretical framework, I find it beneficial to note that in the Czech Republic the forms include foster care, temporary foster care, custody of another person, adoption and guardianship (Vyskočil, 2014). A foster parent of the child carries out the rights and responsibilities of parents and the scope of their rights in relation to the child falls within the scope of current legislation. A foster parent, unlike the child's parents, does not have the maintenance obligation. Custody of another person is given when neither parent can provide the child the proper care (Matoušek, Pazlarová 2010). The scope of rights and obligations of the caregiver is determined by the court. With an adoption of a child, a new legal relationship arises between the child and the adoptive, the same as that between a parent and a child. The guardianship is established in this case when neither parent carries out or has parental responsibility for a child in its entirety. The guardian becomes the legal representative of the child, manages his/her assets and raises the child (Vyskočil, 2014).

Findings by the Czech Statistical Office indicate an alarming fact that single parents are up to twice as likely to be unemployed compared with parents from more complete families (Czech Statistical Office, 2013). These alarming numbers can be complemented by stating that motherhood seems to be a disadvantage within the labour market (Proequality, 2010). Due to the absence of a second child carer, the question of the need to harmonize work and care arises

(Marhánková, 2011). It is also important to mention that the single mother's family is often completely dependent on her income. The need to take care of young children, who require care throughout the day and night and so is the most vulnerable stage of childcare, therefore single parents have a very limited opportunity to earn their living (Hejzlarová, 2011). Skevik (2006) points out that the disadvantaged position in the labour market may also be caused by the fact that single mothers have frequently lower education compared to two-parent families. They have often only finished primary education (Kuchařová, 2007). As a result of all the above described facts, single mothers are highly threatened by poverty, which is pointed out e.g. by Dudová (2009). For some single mothers, the income from the state is the only means of income which they receive and they are totally dependent on it (Hejzlarová, 2011). However, Sustová (2013) claims that effectiveness of social transfers in incomplete families with at least one dependent child is approximately one third only.

In terms of living expenses, the incomes of single mothers are mostly sufficient to finance only the basic life needs (food, toiletries, medicines etc.). However, housing costs are the largest item in the family budgets (Dudová, 2009). These are the high housing costs or the inability to pay rent for a flat which excludes single grandmothers from permanent forms of housing. It is important to mention that temporary accommodation in asylum houses can be considered as socially excluded households, which, for a number of reasons, can be involved in the activities of mainstream society with difficulties (Lux, 2013). According to the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (2005), people staying in an asylum house can be even classified as homeless people. In this context, Hradecký, Hradecká (1996) speak about so called latent or potential homelessness.

### **Methodological Anchoring of the Research**

I am regularly present in the environment of asylum houses as a part of the research work for my dissertation dealing with the inclusion of single mothers residing there. The identification of the research problem for this study therefore



comes directly from the experience of asylum houses in Ostrava. From interviews with social workers in asylum houses for mothers with children in Ostrava, it emerged that not only mothers appear there but also grandmothers with a child who have been entrusted into their care. For this reason, some asylum houses had to redefine the target group of clients to whom the service of asylum house is intended. It was necessary to change the name of the original target group, defined as mothers with children and pregnant women, to *“women with a child in care”*.

Social workers from asylum houses (represented by three social workers from three mutually independent facilities) in Ostrava reported that they had been observing this trend particularly in the last three years. Therefore, I used this time interval for the purposes of the research, as well. The aim of the research was to determine whether single grandmothers with a child in substitute family care can also be found in asylum houses for mothers with children in other towns of the Moravian-Silesian Region, and in what numbers. The second objective was to analyse the reasons for why, or why not, this situation was taking place.

The research objectives indicate the use of both qualitative and quantitative research strategies. The quantitative part of the research took place in the form of structured interviews with social workers from asylum houses for mothers with children in the Moravian-Silesian Region. Each interview consisted of the following questions:

- Have you experienced single grandmothers with a child in care as clients in your facility in the last three years? If so, how many?
- What was the form of the substitute family care of these children?
- Can you remember what the reason for entrusting the child to the grandmother’s care was?

The qualitative part of the research was carried out using unstructured interviews with grandmothers presently residing in an asylum house who have been entrusted with the care of a child / children. The grandmothers were asked to tell me their story with regard to their current life situation. The unstructured interviews were conducted with three communication

partners. The respondents of my research were selected using purposive sampling through the institution of asylum houses for mothers with children in the Moravian-Silesian Region. Again, it was a full selection which was carried out on the basis of findings from the interviews with social workers from particular asylum houses in the Moravian-Silesian Region. The respondents’ participation in the research study was voluntary.

**Kinship Substitute Family Care in Asylum Houses for Mothers with Children**

The results of the field research showed that a total of eighteen grandmothers have been in residence in asylum houses for mothers with children in the Moravian-Silesian Region in last three years. Based on the interviews with social workers, I identified three reasons why grandmothers lived in asylum houses with a grandchild. The first cases comprised of underage daughter’s pregnancy. In all the observed cases in this group, the daughter with her child (the grandmother’s grandchild) lived with her mother in an asylum house. The second group consisted of cases of a daughter addicted to alcohol or drugs who, due to this addiction or its treatment, could not care for her baby. The third group of cases was composed of grandmothers whose daughter could not care for her child because of having to serve a prison sentence or because she simply showed no interest in the child. In some cases there was a combination of these reasons.

**Table 1: The frequency of grandmothers in asylum houses for mothers with children in the Moravian - Silesian Region from 2011**

District	Number
Ostrava	5
Opava	2
Nový Jičín	0
Karviná	7
Frydek-Místek	1
Bruntál	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>



Concerning the forms of substitute family care, only two forms were observed here, namely guardian care and foster care. To summarize the reasons for a division of these forms in the practice of asylum houses, I have to admit that the guardianship occurred most often in the cases where it was not possible to recover the relationship between the child and the mother. In all the observed cases of grandmothers staying with a child in asylum houses, the guardianship occurred only in two cases belonging to the second and third group of reasons for staying in asylum houses (see the division above). In the first case, there was a long-term lack of interest from the child's mother, and in the second case, there was repeated addictive behaviour associated with a general deterioration of the mother's personality. In the first case, the daughter was repeatedly addicted to drugs and due to her addiction she lost her mother's flat and thus was not able to care for her child who would be strongly neglected without the grandmother's care. The second case was a situation where the daughter along with her boyfriend became severely addicted to alcohol and eventually she physically attacked her partner. In this case, even suspected psychological maltreatment of the child was reported.

The rest of the cases were represented by substitute family care, specifically by unmediated kinship care. In this context, I have to mention that the research within the project of the Student Grant Competition was an interesting complement to the research in asylum houses as I had the opportunity to speak to employees of the bodies of socio-legal protection of children in the Moravian-Silesian Region. There, I asked the social workers how they perceive the situation if a substitute mother found herself with a child in an asylum house. In most cases, I received a reply that it would largely depend on differing circumstances. Four out of the six interviewed social workers from the bodies of socio-legal protection of children were willing to accept this situation, but only in the case of a kinship substitute care, and at the same time, in this case when the substitute mother is actively trying to solve the situation with regard to the fact that she did not get into the situation through her own fault. It

is clear that this is not a scientific result, but I decided to state it here to outline the issue of a substitute family care in asylum houses in a broader context.

One basic factor was prevalent in all the case histories which I heard from the social workers in asylum houses. This factor was the grandmother's daughter and her behaviour. However, their behaviour was of various natures, whether it was an unwanted underage pregnancy, the addiction to alcohol or drugs, dealing with problematic partners, a lack of interest in the child or direct criminal activities. As a rule, the daughter's behaviour was generally of a repetitive and escalating nature, leading to a lack of financial means of support on the part of the grandmother. The lack of financial means was caused either by indebtedness of the grandmother (the mother) because of her daughter's behaviour, or by a general lack of finances which was further emphasized by the impossibility of finding permanent full-time employment or by subsequently not being granted foster care benefits. In all the cases the necessity to harmonize the work and the care of the daughter's child was the reason of unemployment. Basically, this issue was even more accentuated in the asylum house environment. In asylum houses for mothers with children, there is a rule that very young children must not remain unattended by their mother, which is an obstacle for finding a job or at least means a considerable complication. The period of court proceedings was also a stated reason for not receiving foster care benefits even if the child has already been entrusted to the care of a substitute parent, but the substitute mother has not been granted the benefits yet.

The second part of the research consisted of interviews with three grandmothers in asylum houses. To keep the whole analysis simple, they can be called Mrs. A, Mrs. B and Mrs. C. The statements of these respondents were analysed using the grounded theory. To enhance the authenticity of the records, I use direct quotations from the statements of the communication partners here.

The loss of housing was the main phenomenon in the stories of the interviewees. The cause of this loss was usually "irresponsible" behaviour of the daughter. In the case of Mrs. A, her daughter



would always find problematic partners who were mostly addicted to alcohol or “gaming machines”. These partners “always deprived her daughter of everything”. The grandmother would always “save” her, but because of the last partner, she lost everything herself. In the case of Mrs. B, the behaviour of her daughters was also the cause of the loss of her housing. They would take finances from her which lead to her getting into debt; the communication partner stated “I couldn’t tell them no until it was too late”. In the case of Mrs. C, the pregnancy of her underage daughter was the reason for losing her housing.

Also a certain “urge to help” was detected in the grandmothers, which in my opinion, reached beyond the limits of their possibilities, either financially or as it turned out later, in terms of health. To illustrate this, we can take the example of Mrs. B who gave up her flat, then her mother’s flat and worked day and night shifts simultaneously to try and help the situation. . The cyclical nature of the two previous causes was the last reason that all the communication partners have lost “everything” in favour of their daughters several times. In all three interviews phrases such as “at that time I still managed to pull her out of it” were often repeated, while all concluded by saying that “I didn’t want it anymore, I had to let her hit the bottom, even though it was tearing my heart”. All the three interviewees were aware of the problems being repeated, but they stated that “blood is thicker than water” and that they had to try to help their daughters.

The context of loss of housing and recurring “problems” of the daughter was accompanied by an increasingly deteriorating standard of housing. Mrs. C ended up with her underage daughter, her partner and her granddaughter in flats with mould, flats in a poor condition, flats with unsatisfactory sanitary conditions, inadequate heating or flats in an excluded locality. The circumstances can also include increasing “intensity” of the daughter’s problems. In the case of Mrs. B, it was her daughter’s addiction to alcohol which gradually got worse up to the stage when Mrs. B’s daughter became a homeless woman who stabbed her partner during an argument. In the case of Mrs. A, it was a repetitive finding of partners who, according

to the words of the interviewee, treated “the little girl increasingly worse” and after all this her daughter would forgive them for such behaviour again and again. According to the interviewee, the misconduct was manifested by neglected nutrition, physical punishment and the pouring of cold water. Mrs. A said that “the little girl even ended up in Klokánek (a facility helping neglected, abused and orphan children) for a moment, she lost weight terribly and started to wet herself at night ... she didn’t trust people around her at all and when I wanted to stroke her, she always flinched”. In the case of Mrs. C, it was a constantly escalating defiant behaviour of her underage daughter who refused to obey both her mother and her partner, and as a result, she became an underage mother and persuaded her mother and her mother’s partner to move in with her boyfriend. The context can also include the ever-worsening relationship between the grandmother and her daughter, which further affects the consequences of the whole story. I had considered incorporating these degraded relationships into the consequences, but due to the fact that they probably have an accelerating and continuous character, I decided to keep them within the context of the story.

In all three cases, the daughter’s boyfriend’s presence was an ever present negative factor in the stories of each woman. This can be illustrated by the story of Mrs. B. Her daughter always managed to abstain for a while, then her boyfriend returned “and everything started all over again”. At this point, we can also refer to the story of Mrs. A whose daughter gradually had three different partners but their characteristics in terms of addiction and violent behaviour were always the same. The grandmothers’ family situation seemed to be another intervening condition. Except for the case of Mrs. C, poor family relationships prevailed in the families. Unlike the other two interviewees, Mrs. C had the opportunity to stay with her family. She has three older sons and she gets on well with them. Yet, her sons did not have any room available where she could be accommodated together with her daughter.

The need to harmonize work and care appeared to be a further intervening condition, occurring in all three interviewees. One of the communication partners was able to find at





least a partial “temporary job” enhancing her income from social benefits. This grandmother succeeded thanks to the help of the workers in the asylum house and also thanks to shorter working hours in the afternoon. None of the communication partners received foster care benefits, even though two of them had their grandchild entrusted in foster care. Mrs. C lived with her underage daughter partly off “*her maternity benefits*” and partly off the benefits for material need.

All the grandmothers also reported a wrongly established relationship between the grandchild and their mother as a key factor intervening in the negative nature of their story, i.e. when the mother consciously or unconsciously neglected her daughter and “*she couldn't recognize what the little girl wants*”. The grandmothers then considered themselves to be the only persons who can provide the right care for the grandchildren. “*I just have a look at the little girl and know straight away what she wants, if she's wetted herself, when she wants to drink, when she's hungry*”. The relationship with the granddaughter of all three communication partners was very strong, and purely emotionally, I would assess it as currently stronger than the relationship between the mother and the daughter, which in the case of Mrs. C was directly proved by her statement “*I don't care anymore what will happen to her, sometimes I just want to take the little girl and not to return*”.

As regards the strategies of conduct, they can be somewhat artificially divided into past and current strategies of conduct. In fact, in the stories of all three interviewees there is a certain boundary when they started to seek help for themselves and their granddaughter, thus finishing the previous “*daughter's dominance*”. In the period of the “*daughter's dominance*”, the grandmothers' strategies of conduct consisted of continuous sacrifice for the benefit of the daughter, whether it was repeated ceding of a flat as in the case of Mrs. B, pledging a flat and taking loans in the case of Mrs. A, or living with the daughter's partner who “*kicked us away later*” in the case of Mrs. C.

The breakpoints in the stories were different, represented by misbehaviour towards her granddaughter and daughter (in the case of Mrs. A), or a violent act of her alcoholic daughter

towards her boyfriend (in the case of Mrs. B), or health problems of the granddaughter and living in a socially excluded locality (in the case of Mrs. C), but they all incited a change in the grandmother's strategies of conduct. The change in conduct started with a certain revolt against the “*daughter's dominance*” and an attempt to “*save the granddaughter*”. It was followed by finding help in the form of an asylum house and an active effort to save money for rent in order to return to one of the permanent housing forms.

Health problems on the part of the grandmothers, specifically weight loss, heart problems or psychological problems, were among the consequences observed in all three stories. Their mental exhaustion was manifested by feelings of loneliness, a lack of privacy, a feeling that they could not go on, and finally a feeling of being greatly hurt by the daughter. A bad relationship with the daughter, ranging from a poor relationship with the underage daughter in the case of Mrs. C up to a complete breakdown of contact and resentment in the case of Mrs. A and B, appeared to be the second common consequence in all the interviewees. The consequences also included a deterioration or complete interruption of the relationship between the grandmother and their current partner. In the case of Mrs. C, her partner lived in the same building as her but in another asylum house. Yet, they could visit each other only during visiting hours and the possibility to be alone was completely excluded due to the presence of her granddaughter and her daughter. However, a positive aspect of all the stories can be seen in a very strong relationship with their granddaughters that give the grandmothers a further reason to fight.

If we wanted to discuss the above findings with the results of other studies, we would encounter a complete absence of data dealing with the problem and the target group. In the discussion however, I consider it appropriate to compare briefly the causes of single grandmothers' staying in asylum houses and the causes of single mothers' staying in asylum houses, in relation to the theoretical concept of the article. The data on the causes of single mothers were obtained from interviews with social workers in asylum houses for mothers with children (n = 6)



which I carried out as a research for my doctoral thesis and I analyzed them using grounded theory. The main phenomenon of both target groups, which means single mothers and single grandmothers, was defined identically as “loss of housing”.

The causes of mothers’ staying in asylum houses include in particular the “lack of funds” and this lack resulted from “the gradual irresponsible behaviour of their daughters” and “the need to help her “. The solution strategies also differed with the target groups because the target group of mothers did not have to deal with “*the behaviour of daughters*”, but could focus directly on the problem situation. This development can be expected inductively in the future even with grandmothers. In the context of the story, in both groups deteriorating or inadequate housing standards were indicated and the consequent need to stay in an asylum house. Compliance in identified categories can be observed in the intervening conditions where in both groups a male person periodically appeared (“*daughter’s boyfriend*” or “*mother’s boyfriend*”), who significantly influenced the life style of mothers and grandmothers. There was also “*the need to combine work and care ‘and’ problematic or non-existing relationships with family*” which could help in a particular life situation. We can also find the same factors as “*health problems*” and “overall effect on lifestyle.” within the consequences. From the above, it is evident that we can find a number of connecting points in these life stories of single mothers and single grandmothers residing in asylum houses because their living situations are very similar in their consequences.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be claimed that grandmothers with a child in care staying in asylum houses for mothers with children are a relevant topic for the Czech social services. Even just the number of eighteen cases in the last three years in the Moravian-Silesian Region is an alarming finding. In connection with this, it is also necessary to highlight the pathological behaviour of the daughters that caused the grandmothers’ situation in the asylum houses. The underage pregnancy, drug abuse or child neglect can be classified among such behaviour.

It is also important to note that the stay in an asylum house has a negative impact on both the grandmother and the child living with her. This influence cannot be underestimated, as it can lead to the continuation of poverty and all the problems related to that in the grandchildren of these grandmothers. The pressure that affects grandmothers with a child in care is very strong and thus can endanger further care of the child, as well. An example of this can be the case in an unnamed asylum house, where a grandmother’s death due to heart problems was observed. We have to admit that this grandmother had had a certain predisposition to heart problems already before staying in the asylum house, but the stress of the given life situation made it even worse. Eventually, her underage daughter with her child were put into mediated non-kinship care.

The objective of this article is to draw attention to the current phenomenon of the occurrence of grandmothers with a child in care in asylum houses, and thus present the Czech social services a challenge in solving this problem and to help grandmothers in this life situation.

The research topic in the terms of its focus on the target group of single grandmothers in asylum houses is up to date and in the Czech Republic there is not enough adequate literature in the form of final reports from research surveys that have been carried out. The description and analysis of the causes that make single grandmothers find themselves in asylum houses can help to streamline services in asylum houses and to target resources better. The advantage of the findings may also be in the prevention of a recurrence of a difficult life situation that can lead to a stay in an asylum house. The description and analysis of the causes of staying in an asylum house may also lead to a shorter residence time at an asylum house, and thus to increasing the chances of successful reintegration into society. Reducing the time of dependence on the social assistance system of the target group can be an advantage for state social policy.



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## Notes

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# Substitute Family Care in the Context of Social Policy of the Czech Republic

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## Abstract

This article deals with the issue of substitute family care from the perspectives of social work and social policy. In the first part of the article, basic terms are introduced: substitute family care and social policy or family policy. However, the meaning of both is ambiguous. The second part discusses the National Concept of the Czech Republic regarding social policy and social work with respect to the current state of substitute family care after the amendment of the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children and the emergence of the new Civil Code. Substitute family care is a social event which requires assistance by society both from the perspective of social work and social policy. For this reason, the article describes how the issue of substitute family care is perceived by Czech social policy and what position substitute family care holds in it.

## Keywords

substitute family care, social work, social policy, children, family



## Introduction

The following article deals with one of the various spheres of social work, focusing specifically on the issue of substitute family care within the framework of Czech social policy. The article shall answer the question of what place substitute family care takes in the social policy of the Czech Republic. However, to consider this issue properly, it is necessary to start with defining these areas. Thus, social policy is described within the context of substitute family care, and then implications for social work practice and further research are discussed. Foster parents, biological parents and foster children are perceived as part of substitute family care but the article is primarily focused on the needs of the child because the interests of the child and welfare principles should be primary consideration when substitute family care is being implemented.

## Substitute Family Care

Substitute family care (hereinafter SFC) is “a form of child care when a child is brought up by “substitute” parents in an environment almost resembling the life in a so-called normal family” (Matějček et al., 1999: 31). In the Czech Republic, there are various forms of substitute family care formerly laid down by the Act on Family and recently by the Civil Code.

Substitute family care is not strictly defined by the law, as it is, for example, in the case of other countries (Poland, Slovakia). Instead, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (hereinafter MLSA) includes under foster care such situations as entrustment of a child to the (1) **care of another person** informally and more formal (2) **foster care** or (3) **guardianship** when a guardian cares for the child personally (MPSV, 2014a). Another person can be most frequently viewed as a relative but he or she can be either a fosterer or guardian, the same principle is applied to a person unrelated to the child. Kinship care is not defined in the Czech Republic. In the past, adoption was considered substitute family care but it is regarded as another form of substitute family care under the new Civil Code at present.

Apart from other tasks, social workers representing the Body of Socio-legal Protection of Children, ensure substitute

family environments for a child who cannot be permanently or temporarily brought up in their own family structure (ČR, 1999). On account of a proposal, a court places the child into one of the forms of SFC. In addition to the forms of SFC, a court or parent may place the child into institutional care, protective educational care or a facility for children requiring immediate assistance (ČR, 2012).

Social workers representing the Body of Socio-legal Protection of Children, who are responsible for the SFC agenda, mediate and subsequently supervise implementation of the SFC. They also mediate the professional services. These professional services for foster families and biological families are also offered by authorized organizations of socio-legal protection of Children (ČR, 1999). In the Czech Republic the SFC has always been provided with one exception. In 1950, because of ideological reasons foster care was abolished and children had to be sent to institutional facilities of resident care. In 1973, the SFC in the Czech Republic was legitimized again. Since then, there have been debates about the correctness of the implementation of foster care and resident care. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs joined the debate and developed the Action Plan for The Fulfilment of The National Strategy to Protect Children’s Rights for the years from 2012 to 2015 (Sobotková, Očenášková, 2013)

## Social Policy

Firstly, it is necessary to consider an important fact – stated for instance by Čabanová and Munková (2005) – that there is no universally accepted definition of the concept of social policy. Depending on the author there are various definitions to be found. Yet, paradoxically, most of the people feel that they know what social policy actually means. Social policy is a phrase often used in various connections and literary genres including theoretical articles from the discourse of political programmes or media reports. Therefore, it is of the highest importance to try to answer the question, what the content of this concept is (Čabanová, Munková, 2005). The same ambiguity in defining social policy is also described by Krebs et al (2010). This problem applies to social policy as a theoretical



discipline and practical social policy as well (Čabanová, Munková, 2005). Key words most frequently occurring in professional discussions to express the notion of social policy are: interest, sense of purpose, effort, sustainability or change, all of these being in relation to the improvement of social conditions. It was also Tomeš (2010) who based his statements on these key words while defining social policy as “a systematic and purposeful effort of various social entities to maintain or achieve-change in functioning, or to encourage the development of their own or other social systems or set of tools for implementing their social or other policies. Consequently, these systematic and targeted effort resulted is activity (functioning), development (improvements) or changes (transformations) of their or other systems or sets of tools, which are reflected in decision-making (or absence of decision-making) and in actions (or inactions) of social entities” (Tomeš, 2010: 29).

In the case of substitute family care, social policy can be considered as a practical activity, which means the application of scientific knowledge in a variety of activities. “Social policy as a practical activity shapes the relationship between individuals and the social conditions of their lives. Everyone, to a certain degree, participates in social policy, helping to constitute on his/her own behalf, whether it concerns the individuals themselves, their family life, or the life of the community. At the same time, however, every person is exposed to social conditions which he/she cannot control, which are – apart from other things – to some degree objectively given factors, for them external” (Potůček, 1995: 10). Nevertheless, it is important to realize that even though the state is responsible for the protection of children, it does not replace the duties and responsibilities of parents at all (Tomeš, 2009). When aiming at specifying the social policy in terms of its influence on the sphere of substitute family care, it is primarily the family policy which will be of an utmost importance. The word “primarily” is used because the field of support to families with children may also include measures of other policies, such as employment policy (e.g. job protection for parents with a child), health policy (e.g. availability of health care), housing policy,

etc. Nevertheless, let us concentrate on the most important sphere, i.e. the aforementioned family policy.

There are discussions underway as to what family policy actually is and what it involves. Technically, it is useful – regardless of how we define or examine a family – to assume the fact that public family policies always deal with the regulation of relationships between: (a) parents, (b) parents and children, (c) relationship of parents, minor children and siblings and their married or unmarried partners (spouses) (Tomeš, 2011). Substitute parents are not mentioned here. In effect, family policy focuses mostly on economic, legal and social support; it also deals with assistance provided to a family by the state (institutions under the public law) (Tomeš, 2011). It should also be added that public family policy is always mainly concerned with children’s interest and less with adults (Pöthe, 2010). As for our SFC discussed, it is undoubtedly the child’s welfare that is the primary concern. Krebs et al (2010) states that social policy can be divided into active (perspective) social policy particularly seeking prevention, which means preventing social problems by adopting certain social measures “ex ante”, and passive (retrospective) social policy focusing on solutions to already existing social problems. It, therefore, responds “ex post” (Krebs et al, 2010). In general, we know from medicine that “prevention” tends to be less expensive than an action of an interventionist nature. There is still the question remaining, of whether in SFC the emphasis is laid more on prevention or rather on interventions following the emergence of problems. We shall try to answer this question after introducing the current family policy and SFC in the Czech Republic.

Varieties of definitions of social and family policy have been pointed out. Based on the above mentioned, data provided by Tomeš (2010) will be used in the article. The above mentioned data will be used for the determination of Tomeš (2010) for requirements of this article. The state will be considered as a subject which creates an environment for effective solutions of various issues through the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Therefore, substitute family care is classified into family policy schemes





as a targeted effort for development and an improvement of system operations. It will be understood as a useful activity reflecting on social benefits and assistance in which case, families are helped by the state. Primarily, children's interest will be of primary importance.

### **Current Czech Social Policy in the Context of Substitute Family Care**

In 2005, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs issued a so-called "*National Concept of Family Policy*". In connection with the planned Czech EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2009 as well as with the topic of family support in the context of unfavourable demographic development<sup>3</sup>, this Concept was updated in 2008 in the form of a "*National Concept of Support to Families with Children*". Since then, this Concept has remained intact. Both Concepts present objectives of family policy as government awareness of the priority of the importance of family, whose prosperity serves as a basis for the sustainable development of our society, cultural, social and economic. The *National Concept of Family Policy* (MPSV, 2005) indicates the basic objective<sup>4</sup> which serves as the foundation stone for general and specific objectives.<sup>5</sup> SFC is not explicitly included in any of these objectives. Basically, the objectives are formulated very vaguely and on an abstract level. The *National Concept of Support to Families with Children* (MPSV, 2008) then states updated basic objectives<sup>6</sup> from which it subsequently derives five partial objectives<sup>7</sup>. Even here, however, substitute family care is not mentioned at all, despite the main objective focusing on formations and stable functioning of families. Therefore, the result is that SFC is not specifically and explicitly declared in the family policy objectives. But at least in terms of content, this issue is addressed. The *National Concept of Support to Families with Children* (MPSV, 2008) refers to a "*Concept of Care for Children at Risk and Children Living Outside their own Family*" (MPSV, 2006)—which means, however, only until 2008, i.e. prior to the major amendment predominantly to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children. The *National Concept of Support to Families with Children* states that measures to support families, in which SFC is provided to children

who cannot be brought up within their own family "consists mainly of support to substitute families in the form of consultancy, creating a support network and extending the range of help from both state authorities and non-profit organizations, respectively. Apart from this, there is also the question of financial security of families with children foster to substitute family care which is of the highest importance. In this area, it is necessary to solve the long-term problematic financing of foster families in facilities for foster care implementation, whereas the state must assume a direct responsibility for their adequate security and thus create the required conditions for stabilization and further development of facilities for foster care implementation" (MPSV, 2008: 25).

### **Social Work with Substitute Family Care in the Context of Czech Social Policy**

In relation to SFC, the National Concept of Support to Families with Children particularly lists measures to support consultancy, creating of a support network and extending the range of offered help from both state authorities and non-profit organizations (MPSV, 2008). The amendment to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children, in its current version, has established rights and obligations in foster care implementation on the basis of which a caring person and a temporary foster carer<sup>8</sup> have to agree to an agreement with the municipal authority of a municipality with extended powers, a local authority, a regional authority or an authorized organizations. The person is also obliged to increase their knowledge and skills in the field of education and child care, and in accordance with an individual child protection plan, they are obliged to maintain, develop and enhance the child's sense of belonging to the persons close to the child, and to allow the monitoring of the implementation of the agreement on performing foster care. On the other hand, the caring persons are given permanent or temporary assistance in providing personal care for the entrusted child, with full-day care of the entrusted child<sup>9</sup>, psychological, therapeutic or other professional help, mediation or provision of free opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills being ensured, and finally authorized organizations



are also provided with assistance in ensuring contact with the child. However, these rights and obligations aim at the caring persons, i.e. a foster parent; a person to whom the child was entrusted to pre-foster care; a personally caring guardian; a person who has a child in personal care while court proceedings on appointing this person as a guardian of the child are taking place. These rights and obligations do not apply to one form of SFC, specifically to people who have a child entrusted into the care of another person. (ČR, 1999, Sec. 47a – §47b )

The above-described rights and obligations focus on the areas of life which are for children growing up outside their natural family environment being specific as compared to other children. “Having considered the children’s part, it is about processing the trauma of losing a natural family environment, shaping the identity of the child in foster care, special needs related to genetic load and developmental stages of the child. Regarding the part of the foster parents, it is about processing and accepting the role of a foster parent in its ambiguity and complexity, the foster parents’ relationship to the family and background of the child, and cooperation with the family of the child” (Hofrová, 2013).

In practice, as described by Hofrová (2013), social workers and other professionals in social services encounter two attitudes concerning the agreement on performing foster care. For a number of caregivers the agreement presents a complication burdening them with many new responsibilities the meaningfulness of which they doubt. These predominantly include the caregivers who have been raising the foster children for many years, and especially the caregivers who have children in so-called kinship care. Here, social workers must explain thoroughly the benefits of the agreement for them and primarily for the children themselves. Foster parents–beginners accept the agreement more easily, as already in the course of preparation for accepting a child they were made aware of the fact that foster care is in a way a professional child care and that concluding the agreement is an integral part of the care.

The National Concept of Support to Families with Children further mentioned the question

of financial security for families with children (MPSV, 2008). Following the amendment to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children, since 2013 foster care benefits have been governed by this act and not by Act on State Social Support, as it was the case in the past. Newly altered, the regional offices of the Employment Office of the Czech Republic (MPSV, 2013b) decide about foster care benefits.

Foster care benefits comprise (1) an **allowance to cover the needs of the child** to which each minor dependent child entrusted to care of a caring person or a temporary foster carer is entitled. The benefit amount depends on the age of the child, or as the case may be, the degree of dependence. The second benefit is (2) **foster parent remuneration** to which a person caring for a dependent child is entitled.<sup>10</sup> The remuneration amount is derived from the number of children in care and the degree of dependence of these children. Foster parent remuneration is always received by only one of the spouses. Grandparents and great-grandparents usually do not qualify for foster parent remuneration, but the criteria for eligibility for remuneration are not specified. Owing to this measure, the number of foster parents for a transitional period increased, in 2012 there were only 7 in the whole Czech Republic, currently, there are 115 (Macula, 2014). Foster parent remuneration is considered to be income from employment only for the purposes of acts governing income tax, social security contributions, accident insurance contributions and general health insurance contributions. Foster parent remuneration does not apply to grandparents and great-grandparents except for cases worthy of considering, but it is not fixed by law or any other regulations where the exact boundary is when the grandparents and great-grandparents are not entitled to the contribution. (3) An **allowance at taking over a child** belongs only to a caring person and not to a temporary foster carer, (4) an **allowance for motor vehicle purchase** belongs to a person caring for at least 3 children, and it does not apply to a temporary foster carer. (5) An **allowance at foster care termination** belongs to a child who was in care of a caring person or a temporary foster carer. (ČR, 1999, Sec. §47e – §47n; MPSV, 2013b)



Foster care benefits apply to a foster parent and guardian who cares for the child personally. Foster care benefits are not intended for persons who have a child entrusted into the care of another person; such persons are entitled to maintenance for entrusted children and to common benefits for families with children under the social system. (Bubleová et al., 2011) In 2013, a year after the amendment to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children came into force, the number of foster and guardian families increased by 10%. Thanks to this fact, a family environment was ensured to 12% of children placed outside their biological family. On the other hand, “the development of foster care, along with the higher foster parent remuneration and a certain adjustment of other foster care benefits, was also reflected in the expenditures of the state budget. In 2012, total expenditures of the state budget for foster care amounted to CZK 1 241 thous. In 2013, it was CZK 2 260 thous., i.e. more than 57%” (Macula, 2014). Since the beginning of 2013, new supporting and professional services have been emerging, as mentioned above; their functioning is secured by the state contribution to foster care implementation paid to municipalities, regions and other authorized organizations which conclude agreements on performing foster care with foster parents. They cost CZK 48,000 per agreement per year, thus increasing the budget for foster care and personal guardian care by this amount. The state receives maintenance from parents of children, but summarizing data as to the maintenance amounts and the successfulness of its recovery are not available (Macula, 2014).

Having focused on the minimum costs, it is true that despite the increased costs, SFC is still the cheapest form of care for children at risk. Specifically, foster care and guardian care cost the state CZK 15,220 per child per month. On the contrary, institutional facilities<sup>11</sup> cost the state CZK 34,722 per child per month (Macula, 2014). Based on these data, SFC appears to be generally more cost effective than institutional care. However, some children may need the more costly institutional care, and conversely some foster care arrangements may be more expensive than others. Similarly, it is also the most effective form of placement

psychologically, which has already been stressed in the last century. In Czech literature, Matějček and Langmeier (2011) claimed that if the basic psychological needs<sup>12</sup> of a child are not satisfied (which in institutional facilities is usually not possible), a healthy personality does not develop and mental deprivation occurs. In English literature, Bowlby (2010) pointed to an “attachment” disorder of children in institutional facilities. This is the absence of a deep and permanent emotional bond between a child and an adult. An adult fails to respond appropriately and sensitively to the needs of the child which results in the fact that the child does not develop in a positive way. A recent study by Ptáček (2011), comparing the development of a child in children’s homes, in a foster family, in a complete and incomplete biological family, found out that children from children’s homes have lower intellect, lower school attainment, while exhibiting the highest values in the field of emotional and physical neglect and showing the highest level of deprivation symptoms, a reduced ability to experience pleasure and a stronger feeling of loneliness in relation to both relatives and peers. This fact has also been confirmed by a number of foreign surveys (Ptáček, 2011).

Despite those facts, in 2011 the Czech Republic was still criticized by the United Nations that institutional foster care is the primary alternative for children who are placed outside their biological family, whereas these children are removed from their biological families mainly for material and financial reasons (OSN, 2011). In the amendment to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children, in its current version, as well as in the new Civil Code, it is newly stated that only inadequate housing and financial circumstances of the parents of the child or the persons whom the child was entrusted cannot constitute a reason for filing a proposal for measures of child protection. At the same time, both acts perceive institutional care as the last possible solution. A court “opts for it particularly if the measures already taken failed to remedy the situation. In doing so, the court always considers whether it is appropriate or not to give priority to entrusting the child to the care of a natural related person” (ČR, 2012, Sec. § 971). According to Macula



(2014), the current number of children placed in institutional care is decreasing continually. However, not all children can be placed into substitute family care, for some children it will be also necessary to maintain institutional care (Tomeš, 2010).

Currently, there is also an effort to maximize family support, so as to prevent the placement of children outside their family in the first place. An example is the duty of social workers representing Bodies of Socio-legal Protection of Children to assess the situation of the child regularly on the basis of which they prepare an individual child protection plan formulated with “an emphasis on adoption of measures which enable retaining the child in the care of their parents or other persons responsible for the upbringing of the child”, and to update it regularly (ČR, 1999) The amendment to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children further enacted a possibility of using a case conference<sup>13</sup> and a possibility for social workers to impose an obligation on families to use professional counselling assistance or mediation. The MLSA newly promotes the possibility of using family conferences<sup>14</sup> (MPSV, 2014b). This solution is most effective even economically according to calculations by Macula (2014), as it amounts to CZK 3 500 per child at risk per month on an average; this amount is paid to local authorities (Bodies of Socio-legal Protection of Children) and authorized organizations performing outreach/outpatient social services for families with children.

There is room for improvement: A study conducted by Ptacek (2011) revealed that in the Czech Republic in 2011 the most common reason (66%) for placing children into institutional care or substitute family care is insufficient child care amounting to 66%. In 10% of the cases, it is the financial situation of the family, in 7% of the cases the parents were not able to handle upbringing of a problematic child, 5% of the reasons for the removal consisted in social reasons of the family, 5% of the cases were due to alcohol abuse in the family, 4% were represented by maltreatment and 3% were parents serving a prison sentence. Only in 12% of the cases, were children placed into institutional care for reasons which can

be considered as clearly justified, such as maltreatment, alcoholism of the parents and parents serving a prison sentence. On account of these facts we are convinced that on the condition of appropriate support and outreach/outpatient social work with families, 88% of children could be raised in the biological family environment (Ptáček, et al., 2011).

The Bodies of Socio-Legal Protection of Children which support vulnerable children can apply and implement the measures. Priority should be given to those measures which will ensure the proper upbringing and the favourable development of the child and his or her family environment or in a foster family environment; they proceed with the use of social work methods and procedures aligned with current scientific knowledge (ČR, 1999). Moreover, during the implementation of these measures The Bodies of Socio-Legal Protection of Children can cooperate with authorized organizations of socio-legal protection of children.

The National Concept of Support to Families with Children, as part of one of its derived goals, should strengthen the awareness of the value of parenthood and parenting competences and encourage families towards taking their own responsibility for their functioning and stability, which includes precisely the promotion of development for organizations of the non-profit sector providing services to families in this area, mostly by grant support (MPSV, 2008).

Yet no measure or amendments have solved the situation that SFC in the Czech Republic falls under several ministries. In other neighbouring countries, including Slovakia, it is not the case and thus the Czech Republic presents a unique relic within the post-communist countries. For this reason, each institute of care for children at risk is managed and funded by a different ministry, i.e. by different laws. As a result of this, information about these children is often inconsistent. That is why in practice, among other things, we can encounter a senseless separation of siblings and changing of environment, especially in institutional care (Macula, 2014). In the National Strategy on Protection of Rights (2012) we can find some attempts. The strategy set an objective for making legislative changes leading to



a unified system of “care for children at risk” and strengthening the coordination role of the MLSA” (MPSV, 2012: 21).

### Research Intention

The authors are conducting research on the question: Which factors are correlated with particular forms of placement? Based on the research questions, a **quantitative research strategy** was chosen. The theoretical hypothesis is: There is a relation among the forms of substitute family care and factors arising from the situation of the child and factors arising from the situation of the substitute family. The basic research sample consists of children placed in one of the forms of SFC in the Moravian-Silesian Region. We are interested in children who are at the time of the research implementation placed in SFC and registered with one of the twenty-two authorities of municipalities with extended powers in the Moravian-Silesian Region. The Moravian-Silesian Region was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, there is the largest number of SFC (MPSV, 2013) and secondly for the reason of availability.

The purpose of our study is that in the Czech Republic there are various forms of SFC and each of them is used for the placement of various children for various reasons. We do not know the exact context of what kind of children and into which forms they are placed, we can only assume it on the basis of practical experience. Moreover, each form of SFC is supported by the state in a different way, as described in the text above.

### Conclusion

Coming to the conclusion, it is now necessary to consider the question of what place SFC takes in social or family policy and whether this policy is active or passive in relation to SFC. The question is what in SFC can be considered as prevention and what as a consequence. As for the active social policy of SFC, it includes the prevention of placing a child outside their family. On the other hand, performance of SFC as such will be then regarded as passive policy. As described above, an active policy in the form of support to local authorities and authorized organizations carrying out outpatient/outreach

social services is the cheapest and most effective form of assistance. This is the direction in which social policy should continue to follow. Child care is a valued commodity whose achievement in line with the parents’ preferences is desirable not only in the interest of family welfare, but especially for society-wide possibilities of maintaining an adequate level of protection of families in the field of both traditional and new social risks, while keeping a balance on public budgets (Sirovátka, Hora, 2008).

SFC itself as a passive policy form is the second cheapest and most effective form of assistance to children placed outside their biological family. Based on the National Concepts and thanks to the amendment, SFC is gradually being improved as well as it replacing institutional care which is expensive and in most cases the least suitable arrangement for children. To summarize, SFC is not explicitly declared in the objectives of family policy but the adopted measures take SFC into account. However, only long-time practical experience will give evidence to what extent these measures are successful. Only a consistent social policy reflecting the prevailing values in society will serve this purpose. Fortunately, the recent trends indicate that the public inclines more to SFC than to institutional care.

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- Notes**
- 1 Contact: aneta.haskova@osu.cz
  - 2 Contact: tomas.waloszek@osu.cz
  - 3 Unfavourable demographic development is defined as “population ageing” in the Czech Republic which is connected with many socio-economical consequences. A decline of marriage rate is reflected especially on distribution of a country’s population unfavourably.
  - 4 Creating a more favourable social climate and conditions for families in general, allowing people to pursue their own life strategies in implementation of their partnership and parenting plans. In doing so, respecting differentiated interests and needs of various family types and family members.
  - 5 Precise wording of the objectives can be found in the National Concept of Family Policy (MLSA, 2005) on page 9.
  - 6 To form a family and ensure its stable functioning: creating a more favourable social climate and conditions; eliminating barriers and social pressures which families are exposed to and which threaten their functioning; supporting and strengthening the awareness and importance of family values in society, and adopting all necessary political measures.
  - 7 Precise wording of the objectives can be found in the National Concept of Support to Families with Children (MLSA, 2008) on pages 5–6.
  - 8 Person on record means a person who is registered in the register of persons who can perform foster care on a temporary basis.
  - 9 Represented by a minimum of 14 calendar days a year.
  - 10 Children and foster parents are entitled to the allowance to cover the child’s needs even after the child has attained their majority, until the 26th year of their life at the latest (ČR, 1999).
  - 11 Namely: facility for children requiring immediate assistance – CZK 22,075; children’s home for ages over 3 – CZK 24,480; children’s home with school – CZK 36,246; children’s centre and home for children under 3 years of age – CZK 46,667; reformatory institution – CZK 60,986, diagnostic institution – CZK 95,929. (Macela, 2014)
  - 12 Basic psychological needs: need of stimulation, need of a meaningful world, need of life security, need of a positive identity, need of an open future (Matějček, Langmeier 2011).
  - 13 **Case conference** is a planned and coordinated meeting of the clients, their families and all those who represent or may represent a support network for them. The aim of the meeting is to exchange information, assess the situation of the children and their family, to search for an optimum solution and plan a joint procedure which will lead to satisfying the needs of the child (MPSV, 2011).
  - 14 **Family conference:** is a planned meeting of the family and friends around the child in a natural environment without the presence of experts. The aim of the meeting is to exchange information, assess the situation of the child and to plan a procedure jointly within the family support network which will lead to satisfying the needs of the child (Pagee, 2014).

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The mission of the journal “Czech and Slovak Social Work“ is:

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In the interest of achieving these objectives, the Journal will, across the community of social workers and with co-operating and helping workers from other disciplines, promote:

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