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SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY. IDENTITY STRUCTURE ANALYSIS OF HUNGARIAN SOCIAL WORKERS

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Abstract: Social work education presents several challenges globally, and some specific ones in the countries where previous dictatorships interrupted the development of the profession. In these countries, social workers face problems that are associated with deficiencies in professionalization, largely determining social worker identities. Social work is a practice-based caring profession where practitioners' professional identity is a special area of concern in education and in continuing professional development. This paper presents the results of a study conducted among Hungarian social workers, employing a unique method, Identity Structure Analysis (ISA) to study professional identity. The method yields an insight into the dynamic of identity formation, professional values, and areas of conflict, as well as potential strengths and weaknesses. Hungarian social workers have special difficulties concerning the "double mandate" problem, that is, simultaneously representing their clients and the government; and they experience adversities originating from the overall low prestige of the profession. As a group, they adhere themselves to core values indicated in the Global Definition of Social Work, but evaluate professional education, research activities and critical-reflective thinking as secondary. These findings call for targeted strategies on part of higher education institutions to focus more on professional identity concerns in their curricula.

Index terms: Social work, Professional identity, Professionalization, Higher education, Identity Structure Analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Hungary, the development of social work as a profession had three distinct phases. Church-based nonprofessional charity work was followed by the settlement model and a framework named “open care”, with social interventions provided in poor persons’ or families’ own homes. These early achievements were similar to advances in other European countries. The Soviet conquest and the forced communist rule after World War 2 put an end to early developments. Social work as a distinct professional area ceased to exist, though in the years of “soft” dictatorship in the 1970s the system tolerated certain forms of care to manage emerging social problems [1]. The rebirth of the profession could take place shortly before the 1989 system change. Re-emergence of social work was not the result of a strengthening sense of social solidarity on part of the public but of a centralized preventive measure to combat predictable social problems related to system change. The first social workers were members of the critical intelligentsia with social justice as a core value; co-professionals (teachers, psychologists etc. who were interested in social issues) and even former party members striving to preserve communist “developments” [2]. In these years, Hungarians had hoped for a western-type welfare system, including a system of social safety and solidarity. These aspirations were formulated in an era when the crisis of the welfare state – a solid basis for social work – was evident. The new profession, lacking adequate resources and public recognition, was expected to treat the social ills brought about by the transition, such as poverty, growing inequalities, unemployment, homelessness, and discrimination.

Historical precedents have had their impact on Hungarian social workers’ current social status and career development. Professionalization of the area [3] is a slow process with its definite strengths, such as the formation of a distinct knowledge base represented in the study programs, and a consolidated value system described in the code of ethics. The institutional background of social work is relatively well developed. Public recognition manifested in low levels of remuneration and a diminished degree of autonomy are among its weaknesses [4].

Professional identity is a decisive factor in the caring professions. In the context of the helping relationship, professionals’ attitudes, such as empathy and congruence; and values as unconditional positive regard, solidarity and liberation of people are prerequisites to success. Further, the professional serves as a role model for the clients.

How has social workers’ professional identity been shaped by the above historical precedents and external factors? What are social workers’ responses to the volatility of the social context and to role conflicts? How do they envision their future? What are the lessons involved for institutions of higher education? How can HEIs contribute to building a strong and coherent professional identity?

II. SOCIAL WORKERS’ PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Social workers professional identity is their self-concept by which they “define themselves in specialized, skill- and education-based occupations” [5: 1–3]; comprising values, attitudes, memories, convictions, aspirations, and reflections that are unique to an individual” [6]. Professional identity is determined by the professional’s knowledge, skills, and values [7].

Social work is a context-dependent professional area, what is a major challenge in the studies on SW professional identity. Social workers’ roles and recognition vary from country to country; and the immediate work environment adds a lot to the variability of the profession [8] [9]. They may assume administrative roles or conduct therapies, work with individuals, families or groups and communities. The Global Definition of Social Work [10] is an international resource for educators, practitioners, researchers, and the public. It strives to answer the question: What is, and what is not social work? GDSW determines the core mandates and principles of the profession. Further, the document defines a shared knowledge base and common guidelines for professional practice. GDSW lays great emphasis on values and attitudes as professional identity elements: „*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work (...). A social work definition can only be meaningful when social workers actively commit to its values and vision.*”

Theoretical articles often discuss the problem of double mandate: representing clients’ and government’s (as main employer’s) interests by simultaneously emphasizing help and social control – a major source of role conflicts to be balanced by a commitment to human rights and following principles of professional ethics [11] [12] [13] [14] [15]. Focusing on potential role conflicts and the related ethical dilemmas is not always described specifically in terms of the double mandate problem and articles discuss several other aspects of internal, profession-based role conflicts (counsellor, care manager, case worker, collaborator, innovator (in policy shaping) partner, risk assessor etc.) [16] [17]. Studying social workers’ values fits in the same theoretical and empirical direction [18] [19].

Another main area of SW identity research is directly related to client-helper relationship. This research direction goes back to Jung’s wounded helper concept and to empirical studies on burnout and helper syndrome [20] [21] [22] [23] [24] [25].

III. METHOD

Identity Structure Analysis (ISA), and its measure, Ipseus, is a flexible framework software comprising the advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods frequently used in studies on identity. ISA is externally („population” standards) and internally (group-level standards) standardized.

The discourses to be evaluated are made up of relevant entities belonging to main domains; and constructs representing key themes of the area. These are based on substantial literature review, qualitative studies /interviews, observations, focus groups etc./. Pilot versions are fine-tuned, relying on the feedback from practitioners and experts of the area [26] [27].

Entities position the self in a variety of temporal and social perspectives and situations, such as „me in ten years”; „when I decided to become a social worker”; „me under pressure” etc. Constructs include core ideas and values of the profession, also comprising possible areas of conflict. Respondents are asked to evaluate the discourses that are a combination of the entities and constructs.



Figure 1: An Ipseus slide of the social worker instrument [24]

Main results provided by the instrument are informative on respondents’ values; self-evaluations; attitudes to and relationships with others [26] [27].

Our study used a convenience sample of Hungarian social workers, 11 men and 46 women.

Table 1.
Entities [24]

	Label	Classification
1	When decided	Past Self
2	Currently I	Current Self
3	Private self	Exploratory Self
4	Disrespected colleague	Disliked Person
5	Solving a difficult problem	Exploratory Self
6	The government	
7	My best friend	
8	My boss	
9	Professional role model	Admired Person
10	People in Hungary	
11	in ten years	Future Self
12	I as a bad professional	Contra Ideal Self
13	Clients think I	Metaperspective
14	Close colleague thinks I	Metaperspective
15	Ideally, I	Ideal Self

Table 2.
Constructs [24]

	Label Left	Label Right
1	client as equal	patronizing and control
2	continuing education	finished education
3	flexible about rules	rigid about rules
4	favors self-reflection	refuses self-reflection
5	deserving clients only	chance for everyone
6	part of clients' lives	client autonomy
7	focus on interpersonal relations	focus on societal problems
8	refuses research	research in practice

9	externally formed frameworks	own responsibility for frameworks
10	respect boundaries	help at all price
11	natural skills & practice	degree in social work
12	free from own problems	wounded helper
13	wants perfect solution	tolerates insecurities
14	empathetic	objective
15	autonomous decisions	externally controlled
16	distance from own ideologies	teaches own ideologies
17	critical thinking	never questions guidelines
18	societal catch-up	societal changes
19	faith in clients' positive capacity	people cannot change
20	spiritual orientation	welfare and success
21	team player	counts only on oneself

IV. RESULTS

1. Self-summary is a combination of two parameters, identity diffusion and self-evaluation. ISA differentiates between nine possible states as in Table 3. Foreclosed/defensive identity variants were present in 22 of the 57 cases in the Hungarian sample, indicating a problematic response to challenging professional and personal situations [24].

Table 3.
Self-summary [27: 106]

Self-evaluation	Identity diffusion		
	low (foreclosed)	moderate	high
high	defensive high self-regard	confident	diffuse high self-regard
moderate	defensive	intermediate	diffusion
low	defensive negative	negative	crisis

2. Self-development. Both ego-involvement (EI) and self-evaluation (SE) have significantly increased as we proceed from past to future self-states. The only exception is the difference between past and current selves EI, indicating more emphasis on (and hope in) future self-states (own source, see Table 4.)

Table 4.
Self-development [24]

	t	df	p (2-tailed)	Effect size
Involvement Past-Current	.277	56	.783 (n.s.)	-
Involvement Current-Future	-3.101	56	.003**	.40
Involvement Past-Future	-2.061	56	.044*	.27
Evaluation Past-Current	-5.881	56	.000**	.78
Evaluation Current-Future	-3.852	56	.000**	.51
Evaluation Past-Future	-7.164	56	.000**	.95

Sig. *p<.05, **p<.01

3. Entity summary is a visual representation on self-evaluation and ego involvement, and it includes all entities. Low evaluation of „state” (government) and „people in Hungary” (the public, as source for other-ascribed identity) is a potential source of conflicts.

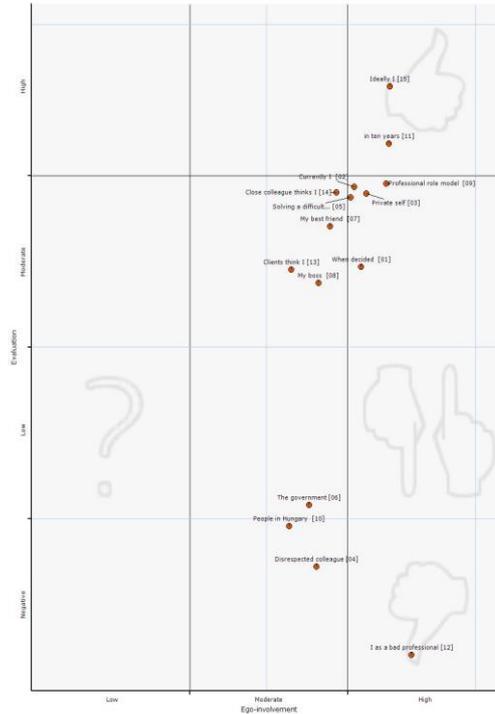


Figure 2: Entity summary [24]

4. Construct summary is a combination of emotional significance (ES) (ranges: low, moderate, and high) and structural pressure (SP) (construct coherence, differentiating between contradictory, conflicted, secondary, core and pressured levels) of the given construct. Utilizing internal, group-level standards *client autonomy*, *client as equal*, *a chance for everyone*, *self-reflection* and *continuing education* were the core constructs of respondents, with moderate emotional significance. The two latter constructs are explicitly related to practitioners' developmental needs. Secondary constructs with moderate ES were *faith in client's capacity*, *eudaimonic/spiritual orientation*, *emphasis on interpersonal relations over societal problems*, *research in practice*, *critical thinking*, *the wounded healer concept*, *taking own responsibility for frameworks*, *autonomous decisions*, *respecting boundaries*, *tolerating insecurities and being a team player*. The large number of secondary constructs may suggest that high-level commitment to professional values is risky in a non-supporting societal environment. Our respondents favored working in the interpersonal domain to managing *societal challenges* and regarded the construct as conflicted, together with *objectivity vs. empathy*. As the domestic training lays much more emphasis on societal issues, often neglecting the need for counselling skills, this preference seems problematic.

V. CONCLUSION

Our findings are in accordance with the worries often expressed but rarely studied by the domestic training institutions, employers, and professional organizations. Social work as a profession in Hungary is based on solid foundations – knowledge base and professional values – on the one hand; and is struggling with the lack of public recognition on the other hand. Our respondents' choices (preferred poles of the constructs) were in accordance with core professional values and ethical requirements, but a relative lack of commitment manifested in the relatively large number of secondary constructs and moderate emotional significance indicate that their current position is not at all rewarding.

Further, social workers underuse possible resources for professional development (qualification and research) but appreciate continuing (practice-based) education. Reflectivity [28] as a theme is a controversial idea: while self-reflection is regarded as very important, critical thinking and autonomy are ranked secondary.

Negative or low evaluation of the government and the public indicate that social workers perceive their own professional positions as insecure or threatened – in accordance with our findings on self-states where one third of the practitioners was characterized by vulnerable identity development.

Currently, social work is not an attractive profession in Hungary. Based on our study, the development of the area largely depends on reconstructing the position of Hungarian social workers within the society. Institutions of higher education can assist the process by introducing targeted programs to address problematic areas, and by strengthening their relations with social service institutions and professional organizations.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Presently, the Hungarian system of higher education is outcome focused. In accordance with the European Qualification Framework, the Hungarian Qualification Framework determines expected general outcomes (competencies), characteristic of the different levels of education. Learning and Outcome Requirements (LOR) [29] determine four components: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and degree of autonomy to be obtained in the given program, i.e., each program has its individual LOR. Due to domestic traditions, many programs focus much more on knowledge and lay less emphasis on the other three components.

The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training [30] is a collection of guidelines and requirements specific to social work education. The document highlights the profession's mission (values); interrelations between practice and education, and social work's contextual nature: "*appreciating the diverse political, historical and cultural contexts within which future generations of social workers will be educated.*"

As social work is a practice-based profession, internship, and practicums (seminars and trainings) are central elements in the programs. Accordingly, dual training systems, which combine training at HEIs and at workplaces, are also available. What is largely missing from these systems is the recognition that lecturers' and trainers' professional identity plays a key role in the development of student motivation and professional identity development.

In their new book, Ellis and Hogard [7] focus on professional identity that they regard as "the overall organizing idea in the curriculum", briefly, curriculum for professional identity development (CuPID). The authors translate the idea into three components of professional identity that can be targeted in training systems: knowledge, skills and values that govern behavior. CuPID fits well into outcome-focused approaches and helps keep the developments targeted.

Academic mentoring is one way to put CuPID principles into practice. A faculty member presents knowledge, provides support, and offers guidance to a student on academic (classroom performance, research etc.) as well as non-academic, study-related personal issues [31]. This type of mentoring facilitates psychological adjustment and fosters a sense of professional identity [32]. In this sense, the mentor-mentee relationship promotes the mentee's professional socialization and professional competence/readiness. Students whose development is supervised and guided by a mentor show considerable performance improvement, they acquire specific skills more efficiently, and their self-confidence and motivation increase [33]. Through these functions and processes, students become more successful not only in their studies but in their future workplaces as well as valued and efficient workers [31] [34]. In sum, the role of the mentor is not limited to managing academic progress, mentors shape mentees' professional identity.

Professional identity is a central concept in education but is difficult to assess. It is not a form of behavior but is an underlying, comprehensive factor. Identity Structure Analysis provides the educators and researchers with a unique tool to measure identity and utilize the results in student and workplace /internship selection, clinical supervision and in designing individualized professional development programs, such as mentoring. Further, an ISA-analysis supports human resource management decisions in social services with varied activities and institutional contexts.

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