



Original Contribution

ATTITUDE TOWARDS ACCEPTING DIFFERENCES IN THE STUDENT - CLIENT INTERACTION IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE

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ABSTRACT

Difference is an immanent feature of modern society, in which more and more cultures, races, ethnicities, religions and languages are being involved. In the process of social work some serious issues may arise if social workers are prejudiced against the multiple aspects in the manifestation of the above-mentioned human differences. The report analyzes the results from a study, which focuses on the students' attitude towards accepting differences, and the problems arising from a negative attitude. Proposed are ideas for overcoming the negative stereotypes and prejudices.

Key words: negative and positive attitude, relationships, prejudices, stereotypes, training, field work, change, values, professional competence

INTRODUCTION

Several reasons provoke the topicality of the work problem. Firstly, the modern world is global and is becoming more and more dynamic, its structure more and more complex, and respectively more and more different and diverse. Secondly, difference has many faces, i.e. racial difference, ethnic difference, cultural difference, religious difference, language difference, difference in the socioeconomic status, age difference, difference in the anthropometric characteristics, difference in the health status, difference in gender, difference in the sexual orientation. Thirdly, the specific nature of social work as a profession requires an interaction with different people and their various problems. Fourthly, if differences are perceived in a destructive manner, this leads to the formation of negative stereotypes and discrimination practices which close the gaps between people and draw dividing lines between them.

Presentation

A widely used term in this study is the term "attitude". According to his Theory of Attitude, D.Uznadze defines attitude as "an

overall state of the psychic subject, readiness for performance of targeted actions and readiness for perception in accordance with the expedient behavior" (1). Attitude is formed with the occurrence of two factors: firstly, a topical need and secondly, a situation for the need satisfaction. Moreover, under "situation" we shall understand a mentally unconscious reflection of the objective conditions of activity. After its formation, attitude determines the overall behavior of the subject by controlling and maintaining the reflected image and the activity. Attitude is made up of three main components: these are affective, cognitive and motor.

Assessment of attitudes, behavior, knowledge, skills, awareness and overcoming one's own prejudice and stereotypes by the future social workers, is an important element of their capacity in connection with the development of cultural competence, and is a precondition for providing non-discrimination, accessible, high-quality and effective social services to the Clients.

Professional competence within the meaning of social work is the completion of a compound set of theoretical knowledge, practical skills and attitudes by the individual. The specific nature of social work requires knowledge about social reality, methods, personal development and legislation specifics. Professional's effectiveness and success are highly dependent on the personal qualities of

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future social workers. Among the important skills and abilities which the students in Social Work need to possess are mental and emotional stability, analytical thinking, initiative, responsibility, honesty, unbiasedness, empathy, sincerity, etc.

Values and attitudes have a deservedly important place since at the basis of professional competence is the welfare attitude and the sense of community belonging. Standing out among these are social justice, striving for social change, respect for the individual and group differences, faith in the client's abilities, consistency in the efforts to help the person in need, separation of personal life and professional work.

The **purpose** of this study has been formulated within this context, i.e. to determine the attitude of the Social Work Students towards interactions with people of different status.

The purpose was decomposed into the following **tasks** of study:

1. Theoretical analysis of the literature dealing with this problem;
2. Determining the attitude towards social work involving people of different status;
3. Classifying the causes for the existence of negative attitudes;
4. Deriving ideas for the formation of a positive attitude in the students for work with people of different status.

Object of the study is difference as a social phenomenon.

Subject of the study are the processes and relationships which are at the basis of difference perception.

Participants: 44 Social Work students at Trakia University, Stara Zagora, of whom 22 female students and 22 male students. The age of the participants is within the range of 19-25 years.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In theoretical aspect, the study rests on two concepts:

- The Attitude Theory of D. Uznadze looking at attitude as a state of the psychic subject;
- The concept of L.S. Vygotsky dealing with social interaction;
- The Theory of D. Goldmann dealing with the individual's social intelligence.

In practical and applied aspect the specifics of the study called for carrying out an empirical procedure including a set of methods: theoretical analysis, interview, self-assessment questionnaire, Fey's test.

The analysis of the results is oriented mostly to the information received from the self-assessment questionnaire and the Fey's test, which is designed in a descriptive manner so that testees can express their position in a quantitative but also qualitative manner.

For the needs of the study the results from the self-assessment questionnaire and the Fey's test were interpreted, however only this part which was directly linked to the purpose of our study. The results were processed using statistical and mathematical methods. The self-assessment was conducted anonymously in order to allow more freedom in the reflections and the obtaining of more detailed results.

RESULTS

For practicing a helping profession, of significant importance are "the generally accepted social values and moral principles which guide it" (2). This means that these social values and moral principles have to be understood, accepted and mastered. The strive to know yourself better is at the basis of this concept. Within this meaning, Fey's test gives a chance to the testees to face themselves and assess their own readiness in terms of preserving the professional values.

The study revealed some interesting results highlighting a clear differentiation in the opinions of men and women. It has to be noted that women are more cautious in their statements than men.

To the question "Practically I feel comfortable with everyone", women's answers are as follows: always (9%); often (9%); sometimes (54%); accidentally (9%); very rarely (18%). To the same question the men's answers are: always (13%); often (36%); sometimes (45%); accidentally (0%); very rarely (4%).

Regardless of the fact that the highest score which both groups give refers to the non-binding answer "sometimes", it can be accepted that women tend to be more cautious in the way they express themselves since there is a significant difference in the answers of men and women after summing up the "always" and "often" percentages, respectively 18% for women and 49% for men.

We presume that this can be attributed to the different social experience which both groups have at the time they are admitted in university, as well as the influences of the family environment.

It is an undeniable fact that the most serious hardships in life come with the economic

instability which is associated not only with job loss, but also with debts and borrowing. In this connection comes the next question "If someone gets into debt with respect to the others, they no longer respect him". Again the answers of the male participants give clearer indications than those of women. Women's answers: always (9%); often (22%); sometimes (36%); accidentally (13%); very rarely (18%); Men's answers: always (4%); often (54%); sometimes (18%); accidentally (9%); very rarely (13%).

Two of the questions place an accent directly onto the attitude towards difference. The results with regard to the first question "Most people can hardly tolerate the different".

Women's answers: always (9%); often (54%); sometimes (31%); accidentally (4%); very rarely (0%).

Men's answers: always (36%); often (40%); sometimes (18%); accidentally (4%); very rarely (0%). This is an indication that men's statements are clear and firm, while women again show themselves as more tolerant.

The second question "I like spending my time with people whose ideas differ from mine" requires a clearer statement of opinion. It is obvious that this question formulation requires a more careful reading on side of the testees, but here also the results confirm the tendency established so far for neutrality and caution on side of women. Their answers are as follows: Always: (13%); often (22%); sometimes: (40%); accidentally: (18%); very rarely: (4%). Men's answers: Always (27%); often: (36%); sometimes: (13%); accidentally: (9%); very rarely: (13%).

After summing up the "always" and "often" percentages of both groups, the difference is in favour of the men, i.e. women: (35%); men: (63%).

As an additional method for studying the attitude towards accepting difference, a self-assessment questionnaire was used. The questionnaire included questions focused on the multiple aspects in the manifestation of difference in terms of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, economic and health status, age, anthropometric characteristics.

The toolbox was developed in a way that allows the persons tested not only to respond but also to protect and justify their own opinion.

The results showed serious convergence of the opinions of men and women with regard to

ethnicity: 62% of the women and 58% of the men underlined that they would socialize and work satisfyingly with people of race or ethnicity different from their own on the condition that those people observe the laws and social norms established in the society.

Another finding we have made is similar to the above and refers to people with disabilities. Both groups believe that it is a sign that the society has achieved high standard if each person is given a chance and is encouraged to live and work in accordance with his/her abilities. Men's opinion is somehow conservative (73%) in terms of economic status and gender. According to them, the man in the family has to provide for the material and financial conditions needed for realization of his children and wife.

Clear is the difference in the opinion of the two groups with regard to the sexual orientation and the anthropometric characteristics of people. Women (82%) underline that they are tolerant to homosexuality but are disturbed by its manifestation at parades and meetings in its support. Women are also lenient toward physical characteristics such as body weight and size ("We all can't have the physical characteristics of a model", "Inner beauty is more important...")

They think that obesity is not directly linked to esthetics, with exception of the cases when it is important for health and might provoke a disease. Men (92%) do not accept homosexuality ("This is a mistake of Nature", "Homosexuality is an abnormal condition..."). It is a curious fact that men are lenient toward female homosexuality ("It is not normal, but it is not something ugly"). They are unsparing toward overweight women, but not toward men something which they associate with beauty. They believe that hobbies involving physical activity are a must for both genders. They underline that everyone should make efforts to look better both physically and spiritually.

The men and women participating in the study are at the same opinion with regard to age as a psychic and physical phenomenon. Both groups think that the elderly people are less likely to adapt to changes, they are conservative, selfish, they are not interested in modern technologies and do not study foreign languages.

The findings from the empirical research give grounds to claim that firstly, there is no clearly expressed negative attitude towards accepting differences. This attitude is rather varying;

secondly, young people are prejudiced against difference; thirdly, there is a need of a personality change in students for the formation of a positive attitude towards accepting differences.

The true meaning of education and upbringing lies in the design and production of realities which increase individual's freedom in one with the individual's responsibility.

Catching up with the main EU parameters in the field of human relationships is impossible to imagine without active integrative processes with regard to differences concerning all aspects such as: culture, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic and health status, age, gender, sexual orientation. The formula of tolerance promoted until recently, turns out to be insufficient. Tolerance places a limiting option, a "from" - "to" line between people, which places people in a disadvantaged social position. (3)

The continuously integrated education ensures some specific experience for each individual, however in one with social relationships within the meaning of a complete worldwide globalization.

Possibilities for raising the moral values resulting from the nature of our information century in the individual since an early age are ensured only through continuous integrated education.

Within this meaning of interest are the ideas of Jacques Delors and Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, i.e. learning to be and to live together with the others at the background of a new global ethics which is being established and which is based on creative diversity and interpenetration of cultures, also interaction between individuals and communities.

The individual development which starts with self-knowledge, with a trip to find oneself, is at the same time also a clearly noticeable social process. Without relationships with the others, without socialization, it loses its value, especially now in our rapidly globalizing society, which incorporates in itself also quite a lot of negative aspects.

That is why the ability to live together with others is an expression of a deep humanism, based on individual's self-identification but also on the social structures (nations, people, ethnicities, etc.). Within this meaning, in the opinion of Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the main elements of general ethics are: human rights and responsibilities, civil society, tolerance,

respect and recognition of the right to self-identification of the other; peacefully settling of disputes, generational equality, etc. (4)

The system of knowledge needed to the social worker is becoming more and more complex. The professionals have to be aware of the course of the new knowledge development in their field, the achievements of science, technology and innovations with an effect on the practical activity. It is also important that they are aware of the appearance of a new group of users, clients and patients, of amendments in the legislation and rules concerning the professional practice.

Universities and other institutions propose a system for professional qualification for continuation of the formal education which suggests a training of the social worker with the purpose of successfully servicing clients after completion of the formal education. (5)

It is important to consider the fact that the basic or formal education is seen as a preliminary preparation, and qualification becomes a systematic sequential process which is also the preparation for being awarded a scientific degree. Of particular importance is the establishment of a connection between the preliminary education and the qualification. (6) The "Social Work" speciality is interdisciplinary in content, since for the successful career students need versatile skills and abilities, i.e.: communication, flexibility, heuristics, ingenuity, mobility, innovation and initiative.

These requirements towards the future social worker call for including in the academic plan subjects such as verbal and non - verbal communication, social coaching, education without prejudice, ethics, etc.). Goods results are achieved by fieldwork.

Direct contact and communication with the different and their problems contributes to getting to know each other, understanding and accepting each other. This broadens the professional horizons and competences and helps for the formation of a social sense (sharing of feelings, multiplication of positive mood, good listening skills, respect for the others), it establishes an attitude for a positive perception of differences and clarifies the idea of the multiple aspects into which the social world functions.

Involvement of students in the academic life, introducing to them the specifics of the different, is a good basis for a joint training which rests on intercultural understanding.

This will help overcoming the existing negativism with regard to the abilities and qualities of the different, which is a precondition for mutual understanding, tolerance and collaboration - required conditions for the prosperity of our postindustrial society.

CONCLUSION

The sustainability of society's integrity is related to overcoming mistrust and suspiciousness towards the different. The study has achieved its purpose and tasks set in advance. It showed that integrative perspectives require critical understanding, awareness and proactive approach for lifting the barriers provoked by difference, at the basis of which are the negative stereotypes, prejudices and bias. This means that in the preparation of the future social workers some accents should be placed: firstly, problem identification; secondly: understanding of the problem; thirdly, formation of an attitude toward accepting difference; fourthly, personality change and building of a responsible and active professional behaviour for high-quality performance of the social activities and tasks.

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