Social work with old age

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State of art

The rapid aging of the population and the simultaneous decline in the proportion of young people in the western world has introduced many changes into the hitherto stable systems. In addition to longer life expectancy, advances in medicine, the decline in the proportion of the active population and increase in the proportion of people dependent on help from the others, we are also witness to changed family and intergenerational relations. Almost as a rule, a reference to old age today triggers the topic of demographic changes. The increase in the share of older people all around the world is a consequence of the specific phenomenon typical of contemporary society, i.e. the demographic transition from high to low natality and mortality rates. 'It is estimated that by 2050, for the first time in history, the number of older people in the world will exceed the number of young people. Even today one person in ten is 60 years or older; according to the UN estimates, by 2050, one person in five will be 60 years or older, and by 2150, this rate will be one person in three' (Vertot, 2008, p. 10).

The perception of old age is also in transition. In general the primary discourse appears as to be the intersection of an understanding of old age as opportunity or the greatest achievement of our society and old age as a problem while older people are 'strangers in the land of the young'.

Although longer life expectancy could be considered an invaluable achievement of our civilisation demographic changes, sometimes dubbed a demographic scare, are often presented in public as posing a threat to the younger people and although some see the changed older-to-young-people ratio as a tragic shift, it can also be understood as an opportunity to begin the search for new forms of co-existence and solidarity.

Social workers should have knowledge about the aging process, social policies concerned with older people and various practical approaches and methods. They also need to possess various professional skills such as the ability to communicate, make decisions, and participate in multi-disciplinary teams. To be able to determine the situation of an old age person, they need to have specific knowledge for assessment of an older person's psychological, emotional, cognitive and social abilities, the verification of his or her ability for self-care, the identification of an older person's strengths and the strengths of their environment (social network) as well as potential obstacles in an otherwise supportive environment. Older people must be seen in the context of the communities to which they belong, either geographically or as communities of interest.

At the turn of the 20th century, the main 'social issue' in industrial countries had been the situation of the working class. At the turn of the 21st century, the working class issue ceased to be the main political and social topic. The focus shifted to demographic changes (Payne, 2005, Lymbery, 2005, McDonald, 2010), particularly the increase in the older population, and our response to these changes, including new social solidarity that is often called intergenerational solidarity and coexistence. In new social circumstances, social work has been increasingly concentrating on the older population. On the global level, social work with older people has become an even more important area of social work as a whole. At the same

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time, the nature of social work with older people is such that it concerns all social workers no matter which area they have been specializing in. We all become old and we are all potential users of services provided by social workers. Although we may be less aware of this fact when working with other age groups of social work users, it is none the less important for that.

The increase in the proportion of older people and the advancement of retirement policies, social and health services, gerontology and other disciplines during the 1960s were the key factors that gradually changed the attitude to older people within social work. Means & Smith (1994) have described the history of service neglect, the emphasis on stigmatised institutional provision and negative stereotypes of old age, all of which have historically informed the provision of services for older people. An unsympathetic legislative framework has inhibited the development of anti-discriminatory practice by focusing on individual deficit and the provision of care as commodity (McDonald, 2010). Old age was not seen as one of the developmental stages in human life but as a problem to which social policies should respond in an adequate manner. Older people have been seen as passive recipients of welfare, rather than as active in their enjoyment of citizenship rights. Social work in this area was predominantly generic, rooted in casework as a method of intervention, and unconcerned with economics (McDonald, 2010, p. 25). Social policy, which during the 1980s placed emphasis on the development of community care and during the 1990s on social management, influenced social workers in the way that they concentrated more on their own concerns than on those of older people.

The past decade brought a shift in focus to the individualised forms of community care funding, importantly encouraging the development of work with older people. Enabling older people to receive individual or personal budgets will challenge existing assumptions of services providers about what older people want, but will also need careful monitoring to ensure that less confident consumers are properly supported (McDonald, 2010, p. 171). There is another pitfall in creating services tailored to individual needs that Jordan (2012) described as the attempt that individualisation is becoming the assertion of stronger management surveillance over practice, and with more authoritarian methods in the provision of benefits and services. Social workers are lost compassion and empathy, their fundamental value of respect for users, because the business agenda impacted directly on the quality of care for vulnerable people. In this sense social work with older people has another task to deal with and that task is linked with preservation of its own roots. In present times of political, economic and social crises, the awareness of meanings and roles of social work with older people is even more important.

Social work with older people is on political level most likely connected with long-term care. The rapid aging of the population and the simultaneous decrease in the percentage of the young population in modern industrial societies have radically affected the systems that until recently have been relatively stable. Higher life expectancy, the advance of medicine, the decrease in the share of active population and the increasing number of assistance-dependent persons caused changes in family and intergenerational relations (Flaker *et al.*, 2008; Österle, 2011; Leichsenring *et al.,* 2013; Mali, 2013/2014). The ratio of people offering assistance to people receiving assistance has radically changed. As a consequence, the risk of the failure to provide adequate care and support has increased, while at the same time the burden shouldered by those who provide care has become heavier (Flaker *et al*., 2008; Filipovič Hrast *et al.*, 2014; Billings *et al.*, 2013). While some think that the radical change in the above-mentioned ratio is a cause for alarm, it can also be perceived as an incentive to search for the new forms of co-existence and solidarity (Flaker *et al.*, 2011; Mali, 2013; Nies *et al.*,

2013). Accordingly, long-term care will be a key factor in ensuring social stability in the future.

Flaker *et al.* (2008) argue that one reason for the launching of long-term care debate is the process of deinstitutionalization – the closure of large institutions and the restructuring of care towards alternative forms of community services. This has fundamentally changed the long-established models of care provision and drew attention to the right of people to live outside institutions, within a community and with other people, and their right to make independent decisions concerning their lives. The paradigm of care has also changed accordingly – the emphasis is now on the person and his/her needs, and assistance is considered to be effective if it responds to a person's needs in accordance with his/her expectations and emergencies.

The establishment of long-term care is no longer a dilemma or an ideological question but a reality that calls for a clear definition of long-term care and a scrupulous planning of activities that will ensure a sustainable system of long-term care (EUROPE 2020 - A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth).

Contradictions and challenges

It is increasingly important for social work to develop a specialization area that will be devoted to the issues of older people's lives and all aspects of assistance they need. The role of social work has changed in new social circumstances, with the focus steadily shifting to the work with the older population. Phillips (1996, p. 149) attributes to social work with older people have a very special role, arguing that the survival of social work depends precisely on this specialization area. The older generation therefore represents a real challenge for social work. At the same time, the nature of social work with older people is such that it pertains to all social workers regardless of their specialization area. We all grow old and therefore we are all the potential users of services provided by social workers.

Social work with older people is a specialized area which requires generic knowledge not only about social work but also other disciplines concerned with the later stages of life. Social work with older people should be clearly conceptualized if social workers are to be efficient in performing practical work and resolving the crises experienced by older people (Ray *et al.,* 2009). To achieve this, they need (1) knowledge and experience about the aging process, and (2) specific skills and knowledge needed to research the needs of older people and find ways to satisfy them. The conceptual over-atomization of social work could result in the failure to recognize social work with older people as a specialization area. Social work enters the area of work with older people in a specific way, and it is not the only discipline dealing with people during the later stages of their lives (McDonald, 2010, p. 3).

The old age is a complex phenomenon and the older population is an expressly diverse group. In searching solutions to the crisis experienced by older people, social workers should be able to make critical assessments of the positions taken by various disciplines and policies pertaining to care for older people (Ray, Phillips, 2002; Payne, 2005). The assistance provided by social workers cannot be reduced to one age group, or one generation only. Social work is always conducted to the benefit of all people, all age groups and all generations, since one of its basic ethical principles is not to exclude, restrict or neglect

anyone. The focus of social work's approach is on intergenerational harmony and intergenerational cooperation.

The building of society that is based on intergenerational solidarity is within social work understood as an opportunity to create conditions for harmony among people different than those that prevailed in the past. Intergenerational solidarity represents an encouragement for social work to adhere to an approach that does not encourage the stratification of society into various age groups. Social work understands and respects differences among generations, but also seeks to find ways for the members of different generations to live in harmony, to cooperate, exchange various forms of help, support each other and practice solidarity.

Although it is true that social changes coincided with the onset of financial and economic crisis, today it is increasingly obvious that the impact of the crisis is wider than previously thought. What is at stake are our interpersonal relations, and particularly our empathy. Today we pose the fundamental questions about social harmony but it is important to note that no system of long-term care, no matter how good it is, and no documents or new forms of help will yield desired results unless we recognize that the main goal of long-term care is to help a fellow human simply because he/she is a human, and because the maintenance of dignity is important for the community and the survival of the humankind.

It is almost impossible to develop conditions of community mentioned above, if poverty of older people is overlooked by politicians, scientists, professionals and among them also social workers, even though it has an important impact on lives of older people. There is not much research available on the effect of austerity measures on everyday life of older people, although the topic is a growing issue in social sciences also in social work. Social workers face with the poverty of older people, but at the same time the support for older people is reduced to those with critical or substantial needs because of tightening eligibility criteria for services. Older people began to lose confidence in social work, while social workers themselves admit that requirements of the state push them beyond the limit of acceptable professional and ethical conduct. It would be unacceptable to allow this contradiction to become a feature defining social work, so it should be eliminated as soon as possible.

In the given situation, social work should identify its own sources of power and mobilise its abilities and skills to find solutions to overcome the crisis experienced by older people because of the financial and economic crisis. It is on social work to invest in its own development. The latest changes in lives of older people show how important it is for social work to research changing needs of older people and respond to their life crises proactively.

The impact of austerity measures on social work with older people confirmed the importance of understanding the cyclic nature of social work. Social work is profession that in general resolves social issues by involving in the care-provision process various social areas and levels (micro, meso and macro). Social work cannot be performed on one level only. Apart from being interdisciplinary, it also connects several levels of living (Flaker, 2012), so it cannot be restricted to one dimension only, reduced to one space only, focused on one generation only. Each change initiated by individual is reflected on all other levels and in social work's relation to other professions and experts dealing with older people. The cycle of levels of social work is inevitable. Changes of legislation (on macro level) show great reflection on micro and meso level of social work with older people. Implications of social legislation changed lives of older people dramatically, but also put social workers on trial how to deal with changes on micro level that are reflected almost synchronous on meso and

macro level. Cyclic nature of social work unintentionally became important issue for our profession and science.

Programme for the future

The increasing and continually changing needs of the older generation are issues which have occupied professionals from various fields in recent years. For social work demographical changes pose a significant interest. The specific nature of social work lies in transversal understanding of older people, their needs, and in the assertion of the user as a partner in the helping process. For tackling with this challenge social work with older people needs to consider following points:

- A higher inclusion of the older population in social work and stronger response to their needs may bring about a series of new methods and skills within social work.
- The boundary between theory and method in social work has to stay in the foreground also in the future.
- In a new area of integrated long-term care that will enable the synergy of various disciplines to form common strategies for help and solidarity, social work with older people has to define its role.
- In the traditional care system, help is divided between the informal sector (relatives, neighbours, acquaintances and friends) and the formal sector (professional care providers). Novel forms of long-term care and a new range of care services, i.e. the kind of care that will strengthen the informal sector by adding various forms of help and support now found within the formal sector, demand from social work special attention.
- Care provision, based on the new technologies and on the use of information and telecommunication technologies, has to be based on the needs of older people and therefore demands the presence of social work.
- There is the need to actively include older people as the users of long-term care in researches and projects which attempt to identify new ways of care provision.
- Social work has to encourage older people to recognise that they have the right to live in a community, with other people, to be included in social developments and to decide about their life regardless of whether they are sick, weak or even less accountable.
- It is also important to identify the negative impacts of the existing forms of assistance to older people specially the negative elements of institutional protection that affect the quality of older people's lives.
- The deinstitutionalization of care for older people presents an opportunity to introduce changes that would address the needs of the present older population as well as the future one which, given the anticipated demographic changes, is likely to be even more numerous.
- Older people are excluded from poverty discourse what results in insufficient policy responses. The role of social work is to advocate older people position in reconceptualisation the concept of poverty what will enable more effective strategies.

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