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Em-powering or Over-powering?*

A Critique of the Assumptions behind Social Work

Abstract: Activities in the field of social work are founded to help, support and to take care of clients with all kinds of social problems (e.g. homelessness, addictions, unemployment, social exclusion). Social welfare institutions exist to activate people and help them in cultural and social assimilation. It sounds like an old fairy tale written in rich and caring Europe which rejects the logic of neoliberal capitalism's language to enable to include minority groups who have less capitals (economic, social, cultural, etc.). But there is a doubt – is it a dream or reality? What is hidden behind the institutional-redistributive model of social policy? How to read the activity of public welfare institutions? What ideas and values are basis of Polish social work (understood as the direction of education, the academic discipline and the practice)? These questions about Polish social work should be seen in the perspective of critical social work, referring mainly to critical pedagogy and theory of social justice.

Keywords: social work, critical pedagogy, models of social policy, social welfare institutions, oppressive

Introduction

The objective of activities in the field of welfare and social work¹ in Poland is to help, support, integrate and mobilise individuals who struggle to cope with an array of problems and/or are socially excluded. In the *Social Welfare Act* of 12 March 2004, the scope of activities comprising “welfare” (in the broad meaning

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¹ The notions of “welfare” and “social work” appear together in the present text, but I do not use them interchangeably. I perceive and define welfare in institutional terms; social work, on the other hand, has got a more practical aspect to it, both in terms of educating social workers and in terms of practical help-provision.

of the term) is defined in Article 3: “1. The welfare system supports the efforts of individuals and families that aim to satisfy their essential needs and to enable these individuals to live in circumstances that are consistent with the dignity of a human being” (*Social Welfare Act*, Art. 3, paragraph 1). Individuals who require support in a difficult situation or crisis, receive assistance by means of “2. (...) taking action with a view to enabling individuals and families to live independently, and integrating them into their environment” (*Social Welfare Act*, Art. 3, paragraph 2). The assistance in question should be as flexible as possible, since “the form and extent of a welfare benefit, and the manner in which it is granted, must correspond to the circumstances which justify the provision of aid” (*Welfare Act*, Art. 3, paragraph 3).

For sociologists, historians, educators and counsellors who adopt the critical approach and seek to determine the goals of welfare and social work, to define the situation in these terms smacks of a fairy tale of a rich, benevolent, “welfare” Europe. This is a Europe that rejects, on principle, the neoliberal language of capitalism in order to reintegrate individuals with relatively little social, economic and/or cultural capital into society. The Act hardly mentions difficulties of assimilation, socialisation and integration while those issues are relevant to the utmost – not only in the face of an ever more widespread crisis triggered by the influx of refugees from the Middle East (Syria in particular) and North Africa, but also in the day-to-day practice of helping Polish passport-holders who, for some reason, live their lives differently and make nonconformist decisions.

The proposed definitions of welfare, (and the values embedded in them)² highlight the perspective of care and support; and they delineate the circle of recipients whom the welfare system is intended to *serve* [emphasis mine]. Yet the intuitions of critical educators (cf. Starego 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Fook, 2012) urge to inquire about the actual aims of the activities and practices bound up with aid and counselling. This is especially salient in the light of the fact that the subsequent paragraphs of the *Act* outline the boundary conditions for providing welfare clients with help and support. As the *Act* emphasises: “The needs of individuals and families who benefit from welfare should be taken into account if they tally with the aims, and remain within the capacity, of the welfare system” (Art. 3, paragraph 4). The decision to whom (and in what circumstances) support should be granted lies with the Ministry, in its capacity as the legislative power, and with the local authorities,

² Jolanta Supińska identifies a set of values which “should take a prominent place among the social policy goals: individual freedoms and human rights; the emancipation of groups at risk of discrimination or exclusion; community values (solidarity, mutual respect and bonding with others, family, nation and civilisation’s right to self-determination, and so on – up to the global scale); security and protection from the harmful effects of risk; equality of circumstances and opportunity to succeed in various types of everyday activities; longevity, better health, development of the human species and environmental protection; interesting and meaningful work, creativity, development of academic knowledge; diversity of life as an enjoyable, rather than terrifying, quality, a satisfactory consumption level, leisure time availability; group or private property inheritable or acquired by one’s own effort; religious faith; patriotism; personal and family happiness” (2008, p. 73).

which delegate the execution of tasks aimed at solving social problems. Already in this preliminary survey, a general and vital question arises whether this strategy is not in breach of the constitutional principle that guarantees all citizens equality before the law. Individuals in need, who are found to *meet*³ [emphasis mine] certain criteria for support, are obligated to “co-operate in the resolution of their difficult circumstances” (*Social Welfare Act*, Art. 4). It can be inferred that help is granted conditionally, not so much in a difficult situation, as rather on if there is adequate co-operation with the system. This has its bearings on how the role of social work is perceived: it is meant to discipline rather than support. This involves not only on the legal sphere, but also on the sphere of values and norms: the poor and the excluded who fail to comply with the rules and norms established and shared by the majority are blamed for the position in which they find themselves. Society puts responsibility for the situation on them implying that had they conformed to the rules, they would not be experiencing a crisis. Not only are these individuals blamed for their circumstances but they are also viewed as passive, prone to taking things for granted and lacking an ability and willingness to settle into a routine of work, not least the routine of working on self-improvement.

Welfare clients are often perceived in a stereotypical manner: as alcoholics, thieves or, as the phrase goes, “social ills” [dysfunctional individuals]. This may grow even more harmful as the mechanism of double exclusion is often in place: for instance, aid-providing institutions, including the police, openly cite the “immoral behaviour” of welfare clients. This is why young, under-age mothers are sometimes held responsible for their lot: being too sexually liberated, they “have only themselves to blame.” The list could go on and should be set against the values of the universally dominant, neoliberal order, where what matters is competition on the job market, rationality and the logic of economy. For various reasons, welfare clients do not conform to this logic: they step outside its framework and do not comply with the rules of the capitalist world, which cherishes such values as individual development, capital, getting rich or accumulating assets.

A certain cultural otherness of those in need – their nonconformity – constitutes something of a paradox in the welfare system in that, on the one hand, the social and cultural system compels the clients to recognise the identity of “the other” and respect it while, on the other, the neoliberal economic system embraces the individualistic discourse, enabling a wide-ranging lifestyle freedom and freedom of “being in the world.” These processes and phenomena result in social isolation and the clients’ exclusion from their communities – an exclusion manifest, among other things, in transposing the responsibility for personal circumstances onto the individuals alone.⁴

³ The *Social Welfare Act* identifies two basic criteria for providing support: (1) the income criterion; and (2) the fact of being in difficult circumstances caused by poverty, addiction, disability, unemployment, homelessness and other factors listed (paragraph 7).

⁴ An “inclusive” practice of social activities would be situated at the other extreme.

One thus needs to inquire about the agenda behind the institutional-redistributive welfare model.⁵ Why is this particular model inscribed into the *Social Welfare Act* while social circumstances (but also the practices of providing aid) approximate, ever more, the motivational model?⁶ In the most general terms, we could observe that this is due to the social and political processes in which we take part: precarisation of young people, employment based on civil contracts with no guarantee of social security, the state of the economy, which, after the recession of 2008, still fails to generate sufficient profit and financial turnover, and-or the withdrawal of state agencies from social services. The citizens' economic situation makes them radicalised and inclines them to take things for granted. What is more, no attempt is made to disseminate a social narrative offering an alternative to the neoliberal model and to spread values conducive to building a social system. Education, social responsibility and the common good are but a few examples of such values.⁷

What price are we paying for the kind of aid as outlined above? How is one to make sense of the actions of state-run helping institutions? What makes us help another? What are the values that underpin social work in Poland, as a field of study, an academic discipline but, also, the practice of aid-provision providing aid? The questions are here to suggest that there are many complex and challenging issues to address in this matter. These issues concern not only social work, but also different forms of aid, including counselling. The aim of this article is to argue that it is imperative to include the critical perspective permanently in the study of social work/*on* social work/ into social work and other forms of aid.

A critical view of social work

The thinking that reveals the system's discriminatory practices on society stems from a critical current in the humanities and social sciences. In the analyses of social work, the critical approach is applied relatively rarely; it is in evidence in publications by Jerzy Szmagałski (2003), Karolina Slovenko (2009) or Jan Fook (2012). Scholars explore different facets of the ethicality of various activities, whether

⁵ It is a common consensus there are several models of social policy. The institutional-redistributive model assumes that "the responsibility for the prosperity and social security of citizens rests first and foremost with society because neither family nor the private market is able to guarantee sufficient satisfaction of all peoples' needs" (Książopolski, 2008, p. 153). The marginal (liberal) model is at an extreme here, with its assumption that "family and the private market should be the natural channels for satisfying the needs of citizens" (Książopolski, 2008, p. 150).

⁶ The motivational model assumes that "welfare programmes should cause as little disruption as possible to the mechanisms of the market economy and support the economic growth as much as they can [...]. Above all, human needs should be met based on the criteria of work experience, merit and efficiency" (Książopolski 2008, p. 151).

⁷ Recent publications by Andrzej Szahaj address this subject: the systemic and political solutions that provide an alternative to neo-liberalism and capitalism (2014, 2015).

related to aid provision or to research and assessment. What is of interest to me in this context is the sphere of human freedom and human rights in general as well as the mechanisms of discipline and socialisation towards socially desirable behaviours.⁸

In my argument, I draw on the work of Michel Foucault, who in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) explains the ways devised and applied to oppress those who err, make mistakes and act in defiance of the norm.⁹ Foucault's work is part of the contemporary scholarly canon; it is widely referenced in studies in critical social thought (most recently, by Helena Ostrowicka [2015] to name, but one example). In our present realities, where liberal democracy often suffers defeat at the hands of authoritarian systems, Foucault's analyses sound more relevant than ever. Importantly, Foucault's insights only extend to a number of selected social fields (the prison sector, psychiatric help and human sexuality), with the challenge remaining to describe many other ones still in place.

In *Discipline and Punish*, the French philosopher presents the historical changes in the effects and forms of various types of punishment. At first, punishment was public, with a view to deterring citizens from committing an offence or a crime – both of which were regarded as a form of rebellion against the law, with law being established by the authorities. Punishment was predominantly physical: it was exercised on the body, and its drastic nature was meant to deter and warn not to transgress against authority.

As societies developed, forms of punishment changed. It was concluded that it was the soul, not the body, that ought to be punished. Punishment was to influence the convict to change his or her conduct, and not merely to deter those who might be plotting to commit a similar evil deed. The aim of punishment was no longer simply to impose order and set out the terms of retribution, but to *discipline* society. The result was the growth of disciplining institutions and the rise of other, related processes and phenomena (Foucault, 1995, pp. 211-215), such as the introduction of a social order founded on the values established by the authorities. Foucault argues that “the disciplines function increasingly as techniques for making useful individuals” (Foucault, 1995, p. 211). The institutions started to produce (educate, socialise, etc.) a citizen whose traits would not generate conflict, disobedience or deviant behaviours. Everyone would be equally subservient, disciplined and conforming.

Foucault cites examples of institutions informed by this idea. The disciplining role has been, and still is, played by charitable institutions (and thus also aid-providing institutions). By playing this role, they adhere to Foucault's “directions”:

⁸ The perspective of the present article could be broadened by including, for instance, the political character of aid-providing activities or the mechanisms which render social work political.

⁹ Of course, the concepts of Erving Goffman and Bruno Latour are also usefully applicable in this context.

They will also have to make individual visits to the poor; and the information to be obtained is laid down in regulations: the stability of the lodging, knowledge of prayers, attendance at the sacraments, knowledge of a trade, morality (and ‘whether they have not fallen into poverty through their own fault’); lastly ‘one must learn by skilful questioning in what way they behave at home. Whether there is peace between them and their neighbours, whether they are careful to bring up their children in the fear of God (...)’ (Foucault, 1995, p. 212).

The efficiency and loyal subservience of the regulations outlined above resulted in “*the swarming of disciplinary mechanisms*” (Foucault, 1995, p. 211). As Foucault observes,

While, on the one hand, the disciplinary establishments increase, their mechanisms have a certain tendency to become “de-institutionalized”, to emerge from the closed fortresses in which they once functioned and to circulate in a “free” state; the massive complex disciplines are broken down into flexible methods of control, which may be transferred and adapted (Foucault, 1995, p. 211).

The point, clearly, was not merely to set up institutions to impose the norms and patterns of behaviour on citizens, but first and foremost to make society develop patterns of self-controlling and self-disciplining behaviour. This led to the emergence of another oppressive mechanism: that of “the state control of the mechanisms of discipline” (Foucault, 1995, p. 213). As a result, a highly bureaucratic “administrative machinery” was called into being, characterised by “the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions, compares, differentiates, hierarchies, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (Foucault, 1995, p. 183). “The disciplinary mechanisms secreted a ‘penalty of the norm’, which is irreducible in its principles and functioning to the traditional penalty of the law” (Foucault, 1995, p. 183). Foucault calls this “the power of the Norm”:

The Normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of a standardized education and the establishment of the *écoles normales* (teachers’ training colleges); it is established in the effort to organize a national medical profession and a hospital system capable of operating general norms of health; it is established in the standardization of industrial processes and products (Foucault, 1995, p. 184).

As a result, a documentary system was put in place, and “what was registered are (...) forms of behaviour, attitudes, possibilities, suspicions – a permanent

account of individuals' behaviour" (Foucault, 1995, p. 214).¹⁰ All this results in the homogenisation of individuals, classified based on their social rank and "arranged" in a hierarchical order. This not only causes inequalities, but also makes it possible to quantify deviations from the norm, define tiers, introduce specialisation, etc. In this way a perfect self-disciplining system emerges in which spectacular modes of punishment or "hell scares" are uncalled for. Citizens abide by the norms internalised so thoroughly that they do not perceive them as imposed by force. Nor do they feel manipulated or compelled to act in particular ways. The above pattern is relevant now to various forms of aid, including social work. I shall discuss the latter below.

I argue that aid-providing institutions which operate under the *Social Welfare Act* enact the very set of mechanisms described by Foucault and outlined above. For that reason, the definition of social work adopted in the present article is as inclusive as possible: it covers both statutory actions and legal regulations, the educational system and the societal institutions in which a given aid system operates (the Church, non-governmental organisations, schools, government offices, the police). All this dovetails with the outlook on social work as proposed by Karolina Starego, who defines it above all as action. Starego concludes:

Presented in these categories, the concept of social work that is distinct to a given socio-political-economic dimension is the outcome not only of certain political activities (oriented towards attaining its projected goals at the state level, in the form of institutionalised social policies) but also of specific ideological assumptions (about the salience of its goals) and the rationality peculiar to a given social dimension and comprised of a number of its typical social practices (Starego 2013b, p. 82).

I perceive social work in the critical perspective and approach it as a holistic project of **(1) actions, e.g. aid-related actions** (implemented by various institutions); **(2) education** (education and in-service training of social workers, social policy-makers, students, project beneficiaries, etc.); or **(3) research on social work**. This holistic project would benefit from identifying the problem, wherein traits of symbolic (as well as actual) violence, breaches of human rights, neglect of human dignity and manipulation by the authorities can be discerned in the three fields distinguished above. Pathologies in this area are rife, albeit not frequently discussed: at best, they are picked up by the scandal-thirsty media.¹¹ Certain incidents (e.g. legal

¹⁰ This is reminiscent of the community interview, which takes place at the client's home. In the meeting, the social worker fills in the interview form, which includes questions concerning marital conflict, violence, health and material status. The client takes responsibility for the answers s/he provides by signing the form.

¹¹ From time to time, stories of people "wronged" by the welfare system are featured in the media. One such case is that of Anna Kapela, a single mother of twin girls. Ms Kapela's daughters were taken into custody because their overweight mother allegedly failed to perform her parental duties. More

verdicts) are confidential, while others unfold in an oblique manner¹² or when the public are inattentive (e.g. during festive or holiday periods).

To illustrate how the project of the critical analysis of social work might be translated into reality, I would like to demonstrate possible applications of this perspective to different areas of social work. I shall focus on the three categories I have analysed: privacy (Kola, 2015a), feminisation of social work (Kola, 2015b) and mechanisms of humiliation in aid-providing activities (Kola, 2014).¹³ While originally arising from the study of social work, my insights are also relevant to public, institutional counselling. This is because anonymity and trust in the client-counsellor relationship as well as respect for the dignity of the individual seeking the counsellor's support in resolving problems and difficulties are essential in counselling defined as a relationship. These are universal values, fundamental to any profession that entails helping people in crisis, whether chronic or temporary, emotional, financial, occupational, medical, existential, mental, etc. Still, what unique to counselling (and social work) are the problems related to a considerable proportion of women participating in counselling (cf., e.g. Zierkiewicz, 2009).

Privacy in social work

Privacy not only defies description; it is also heavily politicised. Privacy is a complex term, with multiple possible interpretations on the individual level (as related to social workers and their ethics) as well as on the systemic level, which analyses practices of aid in the state system. Renata Dopierała contributes also the insight that “the need for privacy is created by societies, and societies are different. This is why the idea of privacy changes across different communities, or different groups of the same community, depending on the contextual and historical factors” (Dopierała, 2013, p. 15).

In everyday use, “privacy” means the individual's capacity to keep from others certain information (individually selected and, usually, pertaining to him/herself) as well as to maintain his/her personal habits without them being made public or known to others. Władysław Kopaliński expands this definition and, drawing

at: <http://www.tuwroclaw.com/wiadomosci,wstrzasajaca-historia-wroclawianki-zabrali-jej-dzieci-bo-byla-za-gruba-,wia5-3266-24318.html>.

¹² For example, in early 2013, an amendment to the *Ustawa o monitoringu i wychowaniu w trzeźwości* [the *Monitoring and Education for Sobriety Act*] was passed, introducing regulated fees for stays at detoxification detention centres. At the same time, however, the amendment introduced provisions (included in the earlier statutory order) on the use of physical coercion towards detoxification centre detainees. In its verdict of 24 July 2013, the Constitutional Tribunal (Poland's constitutional court) supported by the opinion of the *amicus curiae*, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, judged the provision on the use of physical coercion in detoxification detention centres to be incompatible with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland.

¹³ The examples presented in the text have been described in detail in the studies listed in the References.

on Maria Ossowska, describes privacy as “personal life, a sense of security in one’s own home, the choice to be alone, the right to an intimate life, which is safeguarded against unwanted over-familiarity” (Kopaliński, 1988, p. 420). This understanding of the term is dependent on the **legal** regulations which extend over the bulk of citizens’ lives, privacy included. “In its broadest meaning, ‘privacy’ designates an individual’s or a group’s ability to keep their personal behaviour and habits away from the public eye” (Chrabonszczewski, 2012, p. 20).

Numerous documents protect people’s right to privacy and intimacy. In the Polish context, the most important of them is the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which grants every citizen the right to privacy.¹⁴ Another *important document is the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations. Article 12 of the Declaration stipulates that:*

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks about his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such *interference or attacks*.

The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ratified by the Council of Europe in 1950 in Rome; ratified by Poland in 1992) states in Article 8 that “everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.” The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights highlights, in Article 17, that: “1. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family (...). 2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.” In 2000, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which lists the fundamental rights, freedoms and principles, was passed in Nice.¹⁵

Despite the ever increasing number of documents concerned with the protection of privacy, the right to confidentiality and intimacy is constantly violated.¹⁶ As

¹⁴ This is indicated in paragraph 47 of the Constitution: “Everyone has the right to protect their private and family life, their honour and good name; and to make decisions regarding their personal life” as well as other provisions of civil law. Also paragraph 51 of the Constitution guarantees that “other than on the basis of a legal act, no one may be obligated to reveal information regarding him- or herself.”

¹⁵ Article 7 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union highlights the necessity to respect the private and family life, while Article 11 includes the requirement to safeguard the freedom of expression and information (“This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”).

¹⁶ “Confidentiality” is a term related to “privacy,” but it includes an additional semantic component, i.e. the imperatives of the state’s security. There are certain spheres of the state that cannot, or should not, be made public as this is required by the common good. In an age when modern information technologies develop rapidly, this becomes increasingly difficult and problematic. “Intimacy” is another, similar term: it assumes there is a sphere of human existence available only to the individuals themselves and their loved ones.

this frequently happens under the pretext of help-provision or execution of the law, a pertinent question is how far **the state's interference in the lives of individuals can legitimately go?** what is the scope of the citizens' privacy actually? What kind of information can they keep for themselves only, and what can be demanded by the institutions?

A conflict between citizens and the interest of the state is clearly in evidence: on the one hand, certain actions require the state to infiltrate individual privacy, and, on the other, the very mechanism of gathering information about citizens presupposes a possibility of (excessive) control and discriminatory behaviour.¹⁷ Discrimination may also take the form of unauthorised intervention in the sphere of civil liberties; as a result, citizens' privacy is infringed so that help may be granted. In such cases, violence is sanctioned by society and regulated by the law. As stated in the introduction, at present it is the state that decides how and to whom to deliver aid. The state and the social welfare system set the terms for granting (or refusing) help; this process is even more robust in NGOs, which choose or select a particular target groups for the projects they implement. This is especially true of the organisations delivering humanitarian aid (cf. Polman, 2011). The state provides the basis for granting privileges and imposing obligations – in doing so, it frequently references the order of values and norms which it seeks to assert.

Marek Piechowiak attempts to address the question of what is the use of privacy to an individual (2009, p. 33). According to him,

the private sphere is a realm where individuals govern themselves, autonomously set their own goals and control the knowledge about themselves; thus, the private sphere is realised as a goal in itself. In this perspective, it is directly at the service of the personal in the strict sense of the term, and of what is traditionally connected with the category of dignity (Piechowiak, 2009, p. 39).

Therefore, “the private is that which is separate from the state” (Piechowiak, 2009, p. 38). How does one reconcile that to aid-provision procedures, which, in social service institutions (pursuant to legal provisions) begin with an interview conducted at the client's home (paragraph 107 of the *Social Welfare Act* of 12 March 2004)? During the interview, do the clients have the right to autonomy of information; i.e. “to autonomously decide whether or not to reveal information about themselves to others and to exercise control over such information, when it is in possession of other actors” (Piechowiak, 2009, p. 39)? What is evident here is a certain battle of arguments, a battle not always won by those who, from the outset, are in less advantageous and more difficult circumstances – that is, by the clients

¹⁷ Discrimination and symbolic violence take place, for instance, when due to state-produced reasons a category of citizens does not have equal opportunity to execute their rights or when a certain category of citizens is disproportionately burdened as compared with the rest of society. What is more, a legal and institutional framework is established to privilege a certain social category (or categories) – or, conversely, to disadvantage a certain group.

of welfare, counselling or coaching. Worse even, as a result of such procedures, the clients' feelings of degradation, exclusion and humiliation are aggravated.

Humiliation and violence in the welfare system

Breaching the rules of privacy and intimacy exemplifies the "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1963). It can be regarded as an example not only of oppression but also of deliberate humiliation. Humiliation is an emotionally charged term; it is also replete with connotations. One may first consider humiliation in social work as a discriminatory practice, where the humiliated party is weaker, poorer, ill, old, homeless, etc. This amounts to a twofold practice of exclusion. Łukasz Zaorski-Sikora accounts for such actions drawing on German philosophy:

According to G.W.F. Hegel, the infliction of suffering is a constitutive act of determining one's consciousness: domination is the only available way of experiencing one's own will. In other words, the person who is not sure whether he can govern himself must give orders to others to see whether he has the order-giving power. Unable to control his own consciousness, he will be aiming to destroy, torment and dominate the consciousness of those weaker than himself (2008, p. 23).

Such developments and phenomena can be explained by theories of symbolic violence, e.g. those proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1990) and Andrzej Zybortowicz (1995). When do such developments and phenomena take place? One example is when clients are required to complete applications and forms, whereby their right to privacy is violated; or when they are obligated to sign a social contract, irrespective of their right to freedom and independent decision-making.

Second, social work as the object of research can be situated, both methodologically and theoretically, at the intersection of several fields. What is studied are practical interests and activities (including institutional activities). As Karolina Slovenko has noted, "the many (often conflicting) 'loyalties' of social workers, the duality of their roles (as helpers and controllers) and the institutional framework for their actions – all this calls for a growing ethical awareness in the profession" (2009, p. 36).

Humiliation may be deliberate, but also unintentional, a result of harboured prejudice. Distinctly, the person displaying a prejudiced attitude rejects a thing or a person for no rational reason, failing to advance any rational arguments in the discussion. This kind of attitude usually results from insufficient knowledge on a given subject, as is the case with racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia or sexism. Prejudices stem, above all, from the stereotypes consolidated in society over

many years.¹⁸ The endorsement of humiliation mechanisms by private individuals, as such, does not yet threaten society's *modus operandi*. When, however, they take on an institutional character and become part of certain ideologies, they may jeopardise the social order.

Yet what is usually discussed in the systemic and institutional context is not humiliation, but violence and coercion, which is correlated with it. In his definition of violence, Radosław Sojak's point of reference is exactly that – coercion. As he puts it, coercion designates "a social sphere where at least some individuals are systematically compelled to face situations which offer no alternative at present or lead to physical violence" (2007, p. 11). Elaborating on the notion, Sojak adds: "What is key here is precisely that systematic, repetitive nature of coercion" (Sojak 2007, p. 11). A. Zybertowicz explains: "We are faced with an overwhelming situation when an individual or a group are unable to oppose a given set of circumstances, when they are left with no choice" (Zybertowicz, 1995, p. 49). Szymon Wróbel, in turn, emphasises that both parties to a humiliating relation are involved in such violent and coercive actions. He observes that

symbolic violence is a form of violence in which the affected social subject is complicit. (...) The dominated always play a part in the process of their own enslavement although the characteristics that predispose them to that are in fact an internalised effect of domination (2007, p. 21).

The same applies to welfare clients, who, dependent on the benefits provided, experience helplessness when faced with the system and the hegemonic power of the administration.

Oppression of women in social work

Humiliation and breaches of privacy in social work mostly affect women: this is largely because women are the main aid recipients. For that reason, feminist thought offers an interesting research perspective on social work (cf. Zierkiewicz, 2009, pp. 333-351). Welfare and feminism intersect at a number of points, for example the insistence on social development, emancipation, the common good and social responsibility for general welfare. As indicated by social work researchers, that is aimed specifically at finding out about and improving the position of women (Dominelli 2002, 2003, 2004; Payne 1997, 2008). Still, the common ground of welfare and feminism could be conceived in far broader terms while identification of their overlaps may give a better understanding of aid-provision process and/or a better recognition of social problems. Still, this does not necessarily translate into initiating research projects that are part of social work. This might be because

¹⁸ For example the view that welfare recipients live degenerate lives divergent from the universal, binding norms.

mainstream social work, culturally embedded in the conservative traditions of Polish Catholicism, leans towards a familiaristic ideology, which “generates a worldview that is strongly dichotomous, divided into the male and the female spheres” (Wódz, Klimczak-Ziółek, 2014, p. 449). It is the man who is “the principal breadwinner”; housework, which is done predominantly by women, is not measurable, countable or financially productive (hence women without jobs are not entitled to a pension). What is more, members of both sexes are offered different job trainings (for instance, unlike training for women, training for men does not allow for childcare).

There are many reasons why no research is done on feminist social work. One of them would be the idea of **influence of the environment** on socialisation, or, more broadly, on cultural determinants:

(...) for both, [feminism and social work] the central relationship is that between the individual and her environment. In feminist thought, this is expressed in the slogan ‘the private is political’ and means the recognition that the situation of women is an outcome and/or an exemplification of patriarchal relations. In traditional social work, on the other hand, individuals are regarded as products of socialisation peculiar to their social environment (Wódz, Klimczak-Ziółek, 2014, p. 446).

Second, the feminism and social work share a common interest in the issue of **exclusion**. But “in the former, exclusion does, in the end, focus on women as structurally and culturally discriminated; while in the latter, the category of ‘femininity’ does not bring the gender-oriented analysis and practice up to date” (Wódz, Klimczak-Ziółek, 2014, p. 447). As a result, assessments and analyses, as well as aid-providing activities, diverge because “where feminism highlights the problems of sexual or economic violence against women, mainstream social work perceives the family in its functional aspect, with its patriarchal structure and, until recently, male power over women as the norm” (Wódz, Klimczak-Ziółek, 2014, p. 447).

Third, exclusion and (male) domination often give rise to **violence**. However, it must be noted that the feminist and social-work perspectives provide divergent definitions of violence, discerning it in different behaviours or spheres of life. Social work endeavours to eliminate the phenomenon, limiting its impact on family members. Feminism, on the other hand, focuses on the notion of “domestic violence,” introducing it into the public sphere and “redefining the normative qualities of relationships within the family and branding violence against women and children as pathological” (Wódz, Klimczak-Ziółek, 2014, p. 447) as well as drawing the public attention to different forms of violence, e.g. economic and emotional violence. These forms of violence are often trivialised or played down by the welfare system (mainly as a result of insufficient knowledge on a given subject and of the inability to provide victims with adequate support). As a rule violence is viewed as undermining the foundations and the power structures of family. Increasingly often

(also in traditional communities), the male aggressor is regarded as a criminal and wrongdoer (this is particularly true of paedophiles and sex offenders, with Mariusz T. as a case in point.). Yet sexual violence within marriage is a rather different story, with instances of well-known people protesting the impossibility of a woman being raped by her own husband still socially accepted.

Kazimiera Wódz and Jolanta Klimczak-Ziółek point to yet another link between social work and feminism: namely, the very notion of *gender*. With its origins in the pre-war tradition of charity work done by upper-class women, social work defines women as not only *predisposed*, but also *predestined* to perform charitable acts. This lends a peculiar overtone to social work; and this is the reason why social work cites “the ideas of sisterhood and the belief that *sisterhood is powerful*” (Wódz, Klimczak-Ziółek, 2014, p. 447; Hooks, 1984).

Women have certain characteristics that enable them to perform aid-related tasks and take on roles in what are referred to as *helping professions*. However, one must be candid about the low prestige of these professions: doctors enjoy a different kind of respect (also in financial terms) than social workers, nurses, family assistants, social counsellors or carers, all of whom belong the professional category of “helpers.” In this case, prestige goes hand in hand with earnings: in the helping and other feminised professions (teachers, rank-and-file administration workers, etc.), they are perceptibly lower than the national average wages.¹⁹ Thus *the women’s relations to the sphere of poverty* can be threefold: they can be *inside*, they emerge from poverty aspiring to the *outside*, or they help others *from outside*” (Supińska, 2014, p. 481).

Conclusion

Michael Payne (1997) or Lena Dominelli (2002, 2003, 2004) define social work as a social activity with critical thinking at its core. Dominelli identifies three main attitudes in social work: (1) therapeutic; (2) sustaining; and (3) emancipatory (Dominelli, 1998, p. 3-5). Maria Mendel and Bohdan Skrzypczak identify (Mendel, Skrzypczak, 2013), as aspects of social work, aid and mobilising activities, on the one hand, and political acts on the other: “If social work is to become a more efficient way of making change happen, it also has to be an educational activity in each of the three aspects mentioned above. In this activity, a critical outlook on reality enables one to productively create new worlds” (Mendel, Skrzypczak, 2013, p.

¹⁹ This is an important observation, in that, according to a 2013 Report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, there were 115,423.9 full-time positions in aid and care institutions; these were occupied by more than 121,000 employees. Thereof 22,000 were (male and female) social workers, with women accounting for over 94% of the total number of employees (Napierała, 2012, p. 360). On the European scale, this is a significant number, particularly given the fact that male social workers make up 11% of the total number of employees in the (broadly understood) EU job market (Czechowska-Bieluga, 2014, p. 314).

8). This is a complex action, as “it is an educational process, where social workers change as they learn, but the individuals and groups with whom and for whom they work change as well. Adopting social pedagogy (which defines social work as action) as a meta-theory of social work, one could argue that community education is crucial, and that it is the preferred way forward” (Mendel, Skrzypczak, 2013, p. 8).

How, then, can critical social work be shaped? As some authors argue, it is essential that the tenets of the thus-defined social work project have an additional advantage of being practically applicable. To this I would add two crucial elements:

1. Educating social workers and social work students, social politicians as well as research scholars; and providing in-service training of social workers:

According to K. Starego, “this approach to social work and the role of social workers calls for projects and educational programmes which will target shaping and raising awareness of the structural origins of social exclusion. These projects and programmes should, moreover, provide the devices for understanding contemporary global processes which influence the social circumstances locally and for understanding one’s own entanglement in the relations of power and domination, which are reproduced on the micro-level – that is, the level of individual consciousness (Starego, 2013b, p. 82).

One must therefore focus on developing critical skills reach the stage highlighted in the next item.

2. Achieving a critical consciousness of one’s own entanglement in power relations.

The purpose of that would be “to reconstruct the professional practice” (Starego, 2013b), which would not only minimise the risk of pathological behaviour (the result of which are described above: discrimination, victimisation of the second order, stigmatisation, violence, marginalisation) but also positively influence the assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the actions taken. However, the above applies not only to social workers, but also to researchers of social work.²⁰ In describing the presented problems, one should not shy away from formulations that are both radical and *engagé*.

This view of the role of social work is closely related to the critical trends in counselling. However, one must remember that the Polish model of social work is grounded in legislation and bound up with politically motivated decisions, in which the prospective recipients of aid usually do not have a say. Thus it is mainly the present and future social workers that will have an impact on the actual forms of aid and the shape this aid will take. It is up to social workers to ensure that the support they offer does not humiliate, is not in breach of social norms and does not contribute to the victimisation of the client. One can only break away from the

²⁰ The anthropological perspective has much to offer here (cf. Dunn 2008; Buchowski 2006; Bobako 2010, among others).

systemic approach by establishing an appropriate relationship with the client. In counselling, this relationship is at the core not just of the process of counselling, but also of the contract (often a civil law contract) between the counsellor and the client.

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