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Supporters and Support-recipients: Needs, Competences, Supportive and advisory relations. The National Scientific Conference, Poznań, Poland, 27th April 2017

In spring 2017 we had an opportunity to take part in an academic conference, organized by the Social Counselling Unit within the Department of Education Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, under the patronage of the Polish Pedagogical Society. The University then hosted several hundreds of participants coming from about thirty academic and educational centres from all Poland. The conference was to become an opportunity for an exchange of views between Counselling scholars and practitioners who provide support to people in difficult personal and social situations.

The invitation released before the conference highlighted three areas to be discussed. The first area focused on those providing support: who are they? How do they organize their activities? What are their competences? What sort of dilemmas and problems do they face? What are the assumption they make at work – and what is the reality? This area was also to provide an opportunity to have a closer at support groups and institutions that host them.

The next area became an inspiration to have a closer look at people receiving support. Here, we were to think about their individual biographies and the range of deficits in dealing with difficulties, their needs within support activities and internal and external resources that promote overcoming everyday difficulties.

The third area was to spark the discussion about the support and counselling relationships. On the one hand, we were to look at the context of establishing and managing relationships, and difficulties in creating them. On the other hand, this was to initiate discussion about traditional and alternative forms of support, the models of support and, more broadly, about local and systemic solutions and good practices in support process.

An invitation addressing those three areas became a stimulus for the meeting of representatives of various academic centres and institutions. The participants had an opportunity to talk with analysts and researchers of the supportive prac-

tice, but also with those who wanted to share their experience and present their work. The meeting had an exceptional and dynamic character. The administrators faced the challenge of preparing a high-level scientific event and arranging time for several presentations in just one day (which always created uneasy dilemmas).

The day of conference was divided into two parts. The first, morning part was a general plenary session. The session was well attended by professors, both guests and speakers, interested in scientific inquiry into counselling. The second part of the day – lasting till evening – created an opportunity to meet in smaller groups. The organizers proposed as many as ten thematic sessions running in two parallel panels. The formal conclusion of the conference took place during the official dinner in the University hall.

The morning plenary session was opened by Professor Magdalena Piorunek (University of Adam Mickiewicz – UAM), the scientific director of the conference. In her introductory speech, she shared some reflections that provided inspiration for the team of Social Counselling at UAM to organise this particular scientific event. Professor Piorunek talked about the social and political transformations taking place in our country, the changes of the labour market and life styles, which generate many social problems. She also mentioned the challenges that people face due to personal biographic, developmental or normative crisis. According to the speaker, this generates the need for different kinds of help and social support. The dynamic development of counselling services makes them an interesting field of inquiry. It reveals new problematic issues and creates an opportunity to put forward the question of needs, competences, the way of exploring the effectiveness of counselling activities, and the recurring issue of counselling ethics in a rapidly changing world. What seems to be interesting from research point of view, is an analysis of the relevance of the traditional, well-described methods of counselling practice, as well as new ways of support – sometimes controversial or sparking a critique. Such a vast research topic was, in the opinion of Professor Piorunek, an inspiring theme for discussion, which – as professor hoped – would take place during that meeting. In the next introductory speech of the plenary session Professor Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska, the Dean of WSE, welcomed the guests and participants and formally launched the conference.

The plenary session moderated by professor Piorunek and professor Marek Budajczak (UAM) included many presentations. The invited speakers referred to two out of three topical areas suggested in the conference announcement¹. They mainly talked about the support relationship in its different aspects: organizing, examining the phenomenon, effectiveness, or training the counselling skills and development pathways that may inspire counselling professionals to search for new support methods. The second area that the speakers addressed

¹ The report on the plenary session follows the principle of thematic issues touched upon by the speakers and not the order in which speeches were delivered.

was the particular situation of the counselees in the activities undertaken by counselling practitioners.

Supporting as the main matter of interest among the conference speakers appeared in the speech of Professor Maria Czerepniak-Walczak (University of Szczecin), who presented a few hypotheses resulting from her search for answers to the following question: how should we support people who do not expect support? (as title of the speech indicated). The main thought of the presentation focused on perspective – the proposal of shaping critical awareness among people “at home in their condition”. This postulate was an interesting entry point for a discussion (the term ‘shaping’ proved to be controversial and sparked further questions: Whose benefit is at stake? What for? Who needs to authorise it?), and for searching new support perspectives for those who lost all hope of changing their situation, but who still need support.

Professor Anna Michalska (UAM) encouraged the audience to reflect upon social and individual conditions of providing support. Professor Elżbieta Siarkiewicz (University of Lower Silesia) talked about the everyday counselling as an “invisible script” or an “advisory ceremony”. Professor Bożena Matyjas (Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce) drew the audience’s attention to a particular form of counselling – the crisis intervention, presenting the ways of actions targeting families in particularly dire conditions. Professor Barbara Harwas-Napierała (UAM) presented the categories of factors that determine (and perhaps increase) the effectiveness of family therapy. Similar issues were discussed by professor Monika Oliwa-Ciesielska (UAM), who attempted to answer the question about the effectiveness of professional support offered to people living in poverty. Ewa Syrek, the professor of Śląski University in Katowice introduced the audience to the process of searching for a support model for families with a terminally ill child (including the issue of whether finding such model is possible and useful). Another speaker, Ewa Kantowicz, professor of Warmińsko-Mazurski University in Olsztyn, suggested that adult education and social counselling should be treated as a new specialist branches of training in social work.

Two speakers at the morning plenary session focused on support recipients. Professor Andrzej Ładyżyński (University of Wrocław) talked about family as a collective patient in the context of therapeutic systemic approach, suggesting that family is a special recipient of support services, whose character is determined by a series of factors that go beyond the personal features of its members. The plenary session concluded with the presentation of Professor Krystyna Marzec-Holka (University of Warsaw, Special Pedagogy Academy in Warsaw), in which she pointed out the correlation between the feeling of helplessness and the depression among teenagers and the divorced parents syndrome.

After the break, the conference continued in parallel sessions. There were five groups, each of which included 9–10 presentations. Such a multitude of presentations and the fact that sessions were held in different university buildings

made it difficult for participants to select presentations they wished to attend and to find their way to different conference venues. The organisers did their best to ensure a smooth running of the conference, but with so many participants and accepted speech proposals, such problems were unavoidable.

Analyzing the issues appearing in particular sessions we can notice that the organisers put them together in a systemic way, grouping issues which could provoke discussion among people who deal with similar issues in their research and counselling practice. It was impossible to take part in all discussions, thus here I would like to provide just a general outline².

Section 1 focused on giving support to mentally ill patients and those participating in resocialisation programs. Section 2 focused on supporting families and teenagers supervised by care and educational centres. Section 3 took a closer look at the counselling character of different educational environments, including psychological and pedagogical counselling centres providing, among others, diagnostics, schools, institutions dealing with addictions and co-dependency. The common denominator for speakers in Section 4 were the characteristics and issues promoting direct counselling relationships: the ability to spot the needs, dialogue, initiating the relationship, access to help, conversation and its role in making changes, the ability to take on perspectives (of clients or patients). The last two reports in that section were reflections on the importance of experiences (volunteering) and individual capacity to provide support among students of Pedagogy departments. The last Section 5 of the panel was devoted to discussing coaching and tutoring. Other reports related to application of the methods developed in Scouts' organizations, the outreach method and the so-called third sector activities for the youth at risk of marginalization.

After the lunch break, we continued with the last part of conference sessions. Again, five thematic sections took place simultaneously. Section 6 provided an opportunity to discuss roles and social situation of professional and nonprofessional guardians of support recipients. In the second part of the session, participants talked about the place of mediation in counselling, and about other forms of support mediated by newsletters (e-mails send to many recipients at the same time) and direct support, e.g. vocational guidance or counselling tailored for people with disabilities. Section 7 was a group dealing with issues related to medical treatment, health protection and supporting people struggling with chronic diseases. Two out of eight presentations concerned supporting youth at different developmental stages.

Section 8 was organized around various dilemmas and challenges in social work: boundary contacts leading to harmony with the environment or indiffe-

² The detailed conference agenda with presentation titles can be found under the following address: <https://wse.amu.edu.pl/strona-glowna/content-wse/324734-ogolnopolska-konferencja-naukowa-pomagajacy-i-wspomagani.-potrzeby-kompetencje-relacje-pomocowe-i-poradnicze> (13.03.2018).

rence, legal issues in the process of supporting clients, the street workers' experience, freedom and lack of it in a professional guardian's reflection, subjectivity in social work, the space of home(less)ness, support for former prisoners and the importance of catholic counselling in the process of supporting people at different stages of life. Presentations of Section 9 paid particular attention to various forms of support, such as: Arts therapy, therapy concentrated on solutions, volunteering, hospice work, training and original support programs targeting narrow groups of people. Section 10 was mainly devoted to people providing professional support. The presentations focused on the issues of competences, job satisfaction and burnout symptoms among the counsellors, challenges and work conditions they face. The sessions and the whole conference concluded during an official dinner organized at the University premises.

The 27th of April 2017 was indeed a busy day for the participants of the conference. The number of presentations, and a whole series of interesting issues that emerged, as well as fast pace of work were both tiring and stimulating in terms of intellectual effort and the intensity of time spent at University of Poznań. Parallel sessions did not allow to fully satisfy everyone's wishes, as it was difficult to choose among so many interesting presentations announced in the conference agenda. The intensity of work, however, made it easier to overlook the deficiencies of weaker, less prepared presentations, as they were inevitably followed by other excellent ones. Just as during other such conferences, there was too little time allocated for discussion and exchange of views after presentations, although the gradually waning stamina of the participants and the audience also played a role.

The conference "*Supporters and Support-recipients: Needs, Competences, Supportive and advisory relations*" was an event that is not easy to summarize. There were over one hundred speeches of different quality and character. The authors included renowned scientists, researchers and debutants looking for their way, reflective practitioners working outside the university and university students. A large group of speakers were members of Scientific Counselling Association, of whom 15 took part in the conference. Outside of seminar rooms, we were exchanging views and those unhappy with the conference (complaining about the quality of presentations being not up to their expectations) were arguing with the 'treasure hunters' (who at each and every conference are able to find something that will inspire their own growth). Long university corridors bore witness to many interesting discussions following session, to networking by researchers interested in counselling, to meetings between old and new friends, which is a great privilege of such meetings. The Social Counselling Unit of the Department of Education Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań proved to be a hospitable and highly-involved host for all those who accepted their invitation to the conference.

Translated by Karolina Ambrożewicz