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Developing Skills Regarding Empowerment as the Basis for Assisting Socially Excluded People

Abstract

The social assistance system faces challenges related to the emergence of new problems (e.g., migration processes, military conflicts). The ACTTE project was prepared in response to these needs. It is based on the Empowerment concept, which emphasises the social strengthening and restoration of people's total possible participation. One of the project's tasks was to conduct research. Its methodology was based on the action research concept. As part of the research, interviews were conducted. Data were collected on participants' experiences gained during the training and utilising the acquired knowledge and skills in professional practice. The results are presented in the article.

Keywords: *empowerment, professional skills, social exclusion, training*

Introduction

The social assistance and social work system face new challenges related to new problems and insufficient measures taken in this area. According to Eurostat (2022), 23.7 million people (5.3%) out of the 447.2 million in the EU on January 1, 2021 were non-EU citizens. 1.9 million immigrants entered the EU from non-EU countries in 2020. Moreover, 4.3 million people have fled from the war in Ukraine

since the beginning of the Russian aggression, seeking refuge in EU countries (European Council, 2022). These intensive migration processes and the uncertain situation resulting from the ongoing military conflicts cause an increase in cultural differences, which intensify the marginalisation and social exclusion of minority groups, which cope worse with new conditions, and often have problems with accepting the existing social-cultural norms.

An effective response to these problems seems to be the use of the Empowerment concept, emphasising the social strengthening and restoration of the total possible participation of individuals, groups, and communities, which, as a result of various historical, socio-biographical processes, have been marginalised, neglected, or excluded (Bennett Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Currently, there are many opportunities related to applying the Empowerment approach in the practice of social work, especially in the context of solving important social problems. In social work, we can observe the dominance of the trend postulating thinking about empowering all the actors involved. This trend integrates two crucial factors. The first emphasises the Empowerment of the beneficiaries (poor, powerless, discriminated, excluded, etc.). The second concentrates on the Empowerment of professionals (e.g., social workers, family assistants, etc.). The integration of both factors, i.e., the empowerment of social workers in an institution or organisation providing services and the empowerment of the clients of this organisation (beneficiaries), is necessary to guarantee greater effectiveness of the actions taken (Hardina, 2010; Hardina et al., 2007).

The Acting in Context by Training the Trainers in Social Empowerment (ACTTE) project was prepared in response to the abovementioned issues. The project was carried out by a consortium of 4 universities and 4 NGOs from Poland, France, Spain, Italy, and Belgium. Twelve people (NGO employees and academic teachers) were selected from partner institutions to participate in the project. The main goals of the project were: (1) creating tools for intervention work (toolbox) based on the concept of Empowerment for employees of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with marginalised and socially excluded people and academic teachers educating future educators and social workers, (2) developing competencies/skills in DPA (Developing the Power to Act) – an approach using the concept of Empowerment in people participating in training (NGO employees and academic teachers).

The DPA approach is based on the observation that over decades of social work, there is often a lack of productivity, which enhances the social workers to develop a sense of professional helplessness. At the same time, the assisted persons are often blocked and remain frozen in a sense of helplessness, in which any possibil-

ity of change is unattainable in their eyes (Le Bossé, 2016). In line with the DPA approach, Empowerment is the cornerstone of the psychological process in which motivational action is a crucial issue, and the intervention should be tailored to individuals and the context of their lives. DPA is a “process by which people, together or separately, gain a greater opportunity to act on what is important to themselves, their relatives, or the group they identify with” (Le Bossé, 2016). In this approach, the first step is to recognise the problem here and now because the here and now is the only place to act. There is no possibility of acting in the future or the past. It is impossible to rebuild the past or project the future onto the present. So, one of the most important aspects of this approach is that it is imperative to be rooted in here and now. The second necessary step is identifying the conditions required to turn the action into success. To do this, it is essential to recognise the relevant conditions and change the immediate surroundings (Rappaport, 1984). With this approach, it is possible to reverse the destruction and translate it into a construction process, either personal or collective.

DPA approach is focused on four axes that formed the basis for the training provided in the ACTTE project:

- Axis 1: Identifying people involved in the problem.
- Axis 2: Involvement of interested people in defining problems and solutions.
- Axis 3: Taking into account the context when conducting the intervention.
- Axis 4: Introducing the awareness-raising approach.

The overriding goal of the training was to shape the “train the trainers” competencies among the participants. During the workshops, a toolbox containing materials helpful in “training the trainers” work was also created.

Research Methodology

The research methodology was based on the action research concept, including a participatory approach. According to Reason and Bradbury (2007), “action research is a participatory democratic process consisting in the development of practical knowledge in pursuit of goals important to humanity, coming from a participatory perspective, which (...) emerges at this historic moment. Action research seeks to integrate action and reflection, theory and practice, collaborating with others to achieve practical solutions to people’s burning issues, and more generally, to support the development of individuals and their communities”. Action research is a social research strategy that combines the competencies of researchers with the knowledge and commitment of research participants in the

face of social, political, or environmental problems. These actors form a group that jointly identifies problems, gathers data to understand them, and develops hypotheses about their causes. Together, they define action strategies that emerge from the results to mitigate problems and implement them. In the case of the ACTTE project, these were activities related to the use of the Empowerment concept in social work with marginalised and excluded people. The fundamental values guided the implementation of these activities in action research, such as respect for the knowledge and interests of all people involved, democratic dialogue enabling learning from experience, and increasing human ability to deal with one's affairs (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2007).

The research involved triangulation of methods. As part of the qualitative approach, 12 participants of the DPA workshops were interviewed. The interviews were conducted with 8 NGO employees and 4 academic teachers. During the interviews, data were collected on DPA workshops participants' experiences gained during the training and utilising the acquired knowledge and skills in professional practice. The primary purpose of the interviews was to determine the effectiveness of the methods learned by the participants and the possibility of using them in various cultural contexts. Thanks to this, answers to the following research questions were obtained:

1. How do the DPA workshops participants use the knowledge and skills acquired during the training?
2. How have the DPA workshops participants' previous professional experiences contributed to creating a DPA training offer/DPA utilisation?

The results of the research will be presented in the following sections.

Research Results

Respondents' Opinions on the Possibility of Using the Knowledge and Skills Acquired During the Workshops in Their Professional Work

The dominant opinion among the respondents is that they use the knowledge and skills acquired during the workshops in their profession. The academics who participated in the study pointed to the frequent use of resource work and the focus on the positives they learned during the training. Moreover, they pointed out that the acquired skills allowed them to create tools for working with students independently: *"I think that, first of all, I show students their strength and emphasise what is good. I am trying to strengthen them in a positive way. It is obvious that*

when something is done, some work or a presentation is inaccurate, I show them what would be good to improve, but also what was cool. I don't know – that the students' attention was focused, that it was interesting, some new approach, etc., etc., etc., so I'm looking for positive aspects in a situation where even at first glance is not the best" (respondent 1). "I am definitely using a lot of what we are discussing here in my classes with students. I tell them what we have seen in various institutions. And it is cool that we visited various institutions to work with children, including rehabilitation centers, it seems to fit perfectly into the subjects that I teach, so I can tell a bit from practice what work in another country looks like and also prepare for of students, for such work in a multicultural environment, or in a different institution ..." (respondent 4). "I use it for working with students as well as with my colleagues when we are in meetings or need a group to prepare students for work or an experiment" (respondent 5).

The respondents who work in NGOs are of a similar opinion. They see many opportunities in the DPA approach to work with excluded people, especially concerning the context in which the beneficiaries function and their perspectives in defining the problem and looking for solutions. One of the respondents admitted: *"Training to become a trainer has taught me a lot, precisely about imparting knowledge and information. These are things with which, as an NGO worker, working as if individually with people, I had no experience. We just did the job so directly. Not in that form. Well, the method itself is such a nice ordering that there are four axes in which it is necessary to take into account the context, it is necessary to negotiate, and, as it were, the voice of the supported person. It is necessary to set realistic goals that can be achieved here and now. And then, as if letting what you have achieved build your next successes. It is actually organized in such a way that it is real, not just patting that you are the winner and move forward ... a lamp, just to remember the context, to remember these little steps, is very helpful. This is something that is easy to forget when working with a client" (respondent 3). According to the respondents, participation in the workshops gave them new opportunities, broadened their professional skills, and contributed to their personal development. An example may be the following statement: *"Maybe not that I transferred some specific tools to myself, but in this approach to work, because each workshop gave me such a reflection that I felt connected with what I do on a daily basis. Although most people here talk about youth work, I work with adult people, it's a bit different, but the examples of different behavior are exactly the same. So it gave me a lot of reflection and a change of approach, me as such an educator, as a person conducting workshops, meeting these people ... Not even that (..) it is such a professional training, but also so personally. Always such a change, also an international project. Earlier, I also participated in**

international projects, which always give a slightly different perspective, such a time for reflection. That's how I run to work every day and do the same, I'm in some kind of machine in my everyday life. It gives me such a moment of respite, and I come back with completely new energy, a completely different perspective on everyday problems that seem to be big, and after returning, it turns out that it is so easy to solve and manage. So both professionally and personally, I feel the development as much as possible" (respondent 2). The respondents emphasise that they learned to pay attention to action during the workshops because it is the key to success. It is proved by the following words of the respondent: *"You see, it is about action, it is not even a question that I will make my world beautiful right away, but that we should try to act, to do something to improve the situation, not wait for someone to do something for me"* (respondent 1).

Respondents' Opinions on the Use of Their Own Professional Experience in Creating a Training Offer in DPA

All respondents admitted that they significantly influenced the creation of the DPA training offer and the building of the toolbox. Their statements focused primarily on professional experiences, but there were also personal themes. The respondents appreciated the very concept of connecting theorists with practitioners. Workshop participants complemented each other by exchanging experiences from working with students and socially excluded people. One of the respondents (an academic teacher) admitted that her knowledge about the participatory approach was helpful during the workshops: *"In the context of health promotion and, for example, such a participatory approach, which is not only in health promotion, but in general quite widely disseminated and promoted, well, this participatory approach can also be useful here, in the DPA approach, because if we create relationships, or even if we are to help someone, we cannot do it without this person, i.e., engaging them if they cannot define the problem themselves, it is defining it together, asking about its needs, what can be done here and now, what can be improved. Well, that's all... participation, active participation of a given person"* (respondent 1). Another academic teacher pointed to the experience of working with a group of students, which directly translated into the comfort of other people while conducting workshops for students together: *"It seems to me that when we conducted this workshop together, we were so connected by the trainers that everyone had another plot of land. I was from the teaching area, and the other two from the practical side, so there was such a balance. Even today, we talked about it, they felt so safe that they knew that I have experience in working with students. And they also saw that I was approaching it*

more calmly and it gave them such a safety valve that the fact that I work with students, with group dynamics, will be easier for me to control” (respondent 4).

One of the respondents noticed that she did not see a relationship at first and that she needed time to combine her professional work with creating a toolbox: *“There were such moments that I felt it was difficult to contribute something on my part because many people work with young people and my methods of working with adults, in which I presented my tools, could not always find their way in such work with young people. So there were such moments that it was really hard for me to find myself, I thought so, but after yesterday, when we had our presentations, I saw that, in fact, my real cases, the real stories that I tell, actually find such reference in all that we talk about. And in a way, they are impressive and can understand this theory, which is also talked about a lot here. Because we talk a lot about these theoretical things, but showing these real stories is also nice for the imagination and for such a fuller understanding of the whole context that we talk about so much. It is not just man and theory, but the entire context”* (respondent 2). Another respondent noticed that not only case studies from everyday work could be used, but also personal skills. He mentioned that during the workshops, he willingly shared his photographic experience, which he uses in his daily work with the clients: *“Participants take (photos) of each other. I do for them. Or things that are purely practical. Very often, our participants lose documents, so we just take pictures of the documents. As if it isn’t any skill that qualifies for this type of job, but having it is just useful.”* (respondent 3) He also shared his passion with students participating in the workshops: *“We talked about it with the group and with the students yesterday. I just mentioned to them that such a nice tip for a future social worker is that whatever it is, what they did before, what they do outside of work, if they have any sport, if they have any skills or interests, even if they seem completely unrelated, you always have to have them on the back of your head, and if I use them at the right moment, it’s incredibly helpful.”* (respondent 3). Another respondent admitted that she did not participate in the project by accident: *“I started the DPA because I felt very close to that way of thinking. I’m very open to trying new things and because I feel like we could learn every like the new things all the time and also maybe think a lot about the relationship with beneficiaries... I believe in into the DPA a lot and I really understand the sense of like social Empowerment, how you can provide that to another person”* (respondent 6). Therefore, her personal and professional experience coincides significantly with the training offer in the field of DPA.

Discussion

Several studies have indicated that action research frequently focuses on issues such as the consequences of exclusion and stigmatisation, shame and pain, and the struggle and power of people in long-term poverty conditions. During the research, the distinction between the client's and the professional's perspective becomes evident as there is a difference in defining the problem, the objectives, and the approach (Edwards et al., 1999). These research results stimulate social workers to reflect on their perception of clients and their practice and require an intervention strategy adaptation. The ACTTE project and the research conducted within it aimed at sensitising professionals (NGO employees and academic teachers) to empower the excluded individuals and social groups.

Empowerment understood as a process means the possibility of optimal functioning. Its purpose is to enable individuals and groups deprived of causative powers to escape this state. It happens thanks to rebuilding faith in personal abilities and taking control over own life (Gkorezis et al., 2011, p. 84). The respondents emphasised all these elements during the interviews. They indicated the need to consider the client's/beneficiary's perspective in defining their problems and involve them in finding solutions. They also pointed out that the planned solutions must be perceived as beneficial by the assisted person and not the supportive one.

Thanks to Empowerment, excluded individuals can establish and rebuild their status as equal, competent citizens in society. In this sense, Empowerment includes two dimensions: individual and collective. The individual (psychological) dimension (Gkorezis et al., 2011, p. 84) is understood as the internal motivation of an individual, which includes four factors: giving personal meaning to work performed (meaning), knowledge of one's competencies, belief in the possibility of making proactive choices (self-determination) and belief in the value of one's work. Reinforced, convinced of their effectiveness, self-determining individuals create communities of equal and competent citizens (collective dimension). The literature also mentions the subjective and objective dimensions. The subjective dimension of Empowerment means that it includes an individual sense of agency. In contrast, objective means a real expansion of the scope of agency, understood as a sense of internal control, i.e., the awareness that subsequent events are directly related to a specific activity of an individual participating in them (Jarczyńska, 2017, p. 126). Respondents took into account both of these aspects in their statements. On the one hand, they emphasised the necessity to use individual resources of the beneficiary in intervention activities, noting that in each case,

these resources may be different and therefore require an individual diagnosis. On the other hand, they argued that only a person with an intrinsic motivation to act in a specific environmental context can successfully solve her problems.

Additionally, the conducted research confirms that participation in the workshops was essential for the personal and professional development of the participants. The knowledge and experience gained during the workshops made the respondents realise that action is the key to success and that setting realistic goals and awareness of the broader context is conducive to achieving it. The possibility of combining theory with practice and creating a training offer based on case examples respondents considered to be a great value, which they gained from the workshops. All respondents admit that they are ready to continue working following the assumptions of the empowerment concept and the DPA approach.

Conclusions

Nowotny et al., (2003) have indicated new forms of transdisciplinary and contextualised knowledge production where researchers operate in the field and, together with the parties involved, try to practice results favouring the actual environment. It is also in agreement with the shift from 'science' to 'research' pointed out by Bruno Latour (1999), who characterises 'science' as '*certainty, supposed to be cold, straight and detached*' and 'research' as '*warm, involving and risky*', which highlights the people's search for meaning, and participatory action research, that recognises reciprocity in the process of knowledge production. It was also the main assumption of research carried out within the ACTTE project.

Opinions obtained during the interviews from both groups of respondents (academic teachers and NGO employees) confirm the possibility of using the knowledge and skills acquired during the workshops in further professional work. The new perspectives shown by the DPA approach to the respondents are a starting point for taking up new challenges. According to the respondents, the experience gained during the workshops translates into taking up new professional initiatives. Moreover, all respondents admitted that they significantly influenced the creation of the DPA training offer and the toolbox construction. Their personal and professional experience to date was conducive to developing new tools for working with students and socially excluded people. According to the respondents, combining both professional groups during the workshops was very useful. The opportunity to exchange experiences and combine theory with practice enriched the participants with new experiences and fostered development.

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