

Trans-semantic ecosocial contexts in solving social problems during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Transsemantyczne konteksty ekospołeczne w rozwiązywaniu problemów społecznych podczas pierwszej fali pandemii COVID-19

W artykule omówiono strategie argumentacji, które zarejestrowano na Słowacji w medialnej debacie publicznej w marcu i kwietniu 2020 r. Główne pytanie badawcze (MRQ) brzmiało: Jakie powiązania transsemantyczne tworzy zastosowanie podejścia ekospołecznego do rozwiązywania problemów społecznych podczas pandemii koronawirusa? Na podstawie przedstawionych wyników można stwierdzić, że podejście ekospołeczne znalazło odzwierciedlenie w zmianie paradygmatu immunologicznego, potwierdzonego danymi liczbowymi (liczby zakażonych i ofiar) w strategiach argumentacji związanych ze znaczeniem pandemii i podjętych środków. Wykorzystano przy tym wątki historyczne (konsekwencje poprzednich globalnych pandemii) do kształtowania regulowanych relacji globalnych pod wpływem „uzdrawiającego” pragmatycznego metahumanizmu, wspierając w ten sposób „uzdrawiające” środki ekonomiczne jako część biowładzy, która jest sposobem na wzmocnienie pozycji klienta społecznego w rozwiązywaniu problemów społecznych za pomocą **toposu** użyteczności przy uzasadnianiu znaczenia środków zapobiegających epidemii.

Słowa kluczowe: problem społeczny, społeczeństwo; ekologiczna praca socjalna; pandemia SARS-COV-2; styl życia; środowisko; zarządzanie sytuacją kryzysową

1. Introduction and methodology

The Social Problem can be defined as a state of society or social situation that grows from discussions between the existence of an individual in society and the social conditions of human existence. However, not every fulfillment of individual needs cannot be considered. We consider social problems when individuals or groups of people are not their own wine to satisfy their socially recognized needs and interest (Wildmannová, 2005).

The importance of Ecological Social Work in solving social problems today is emphasized in connection with the changes that this society undergoes during and after the pandemic of the new coronavirus, and these changes directly affect the prevalence of social problems. One such process taking place today is a change in rationalising the importance of digitalization, which, instead of the original meaning of obtaining information (i.e. help), is increasingly used for control (TASR, 2020). “Originally a transparent society becomes a society of control” (Han, 2016, p.199). This change could be seen during the SARS-COV-2 pandemic in social work, while working with several target groups, e.g. with seniors in social services facilities, or residents of marginalized Roma communities. During the first wave of the pandemic, the notion of control also appeared in the phrase “to have a situation under control”. The reassuring moral basis for presenting that the “situation is under control” to the population is obvious, and the degree of its persuasiveness is related to the targeting and effectiveness of the anti-pandemic measures taken.

The application of eco-social approaches to the social problems’ solution is necessary not only on a geographical or economic level, but also on an individual or more precisely subjective level. The subjectivisation of the “invisible threat” lurking (not only) in the outside world significantly affected even banal activities such as e.g. shopping or visiting relatives and friends during the corona crisis. Solving social problems in the “uncertain time” of the spread of a new coronavirus also requires a change in the individual approach to the search, but also to the application of solutions in everyday life, as well as in the professional performance in the social work environment. “The perception of life as a continuous chain of problems and their solutions causes not only the risk of burn-out, but also the neglect of other, no less important aspects of reality, which do not primarily contain evaluative opinions of success or failure, victory or defeat, but in terms of metaphysically oriented eco-social approaches they also include the questions of the adequacy of human life” (Levická et al., 2012, p.52), i.e. whether this life is accepted on a theoretical and practical level and if it is productive, meaningful, and carried by man.

The base of this study is theoretical research which does not work with any specific data. It deals with argumentation strategies that were recorded in

the media public debate in the period March – April 2020 in the Slovak Republic and discusses their connection with the application of eco-social approaches to solving social problems using the example of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The research perceives these strategies from a theoretical point of view and conclusions of a theoretical nature are formulated. The Critical Discursive Analysis (CDA) research method was used in this research. This qualitative research method addresses the social problems associated with power that are discursive in nature while this method also examines the power within discourses as well as power over discourses.

The analysis and interpretation of the texts had two phases:

- The text analysis in the production phase consisted of the specific content, articulated topics and subtopics identification which most constructively formulated the public debate about the spread of the new coronavirus in Slovakia in its first phase, i.e. from March 6, 2020 (detection of the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the territory of the Slovak Republic) to April 22, 2020 (until the beginning of gradual measures release to prevent the spread of a new coronavirus) and subsequent discursive strategies identification (compiled according to Wodak-Meyer, 2001).
- The phase of reception (interpretation), where so-called contextualizing indications were used (cf. Gumperz, 2009), which enabled interpretation of discourse fragments in ways that relate them to the interpretive frameworks of the questions researched.

The research sample consisted mainly of texts in separate sections on the new coronavirus in the largest Slovak Internet news media, namely [aktuality.sk](#) (Coronavirus), [sme.sk](#) (Coronavirus in Slovakia), [pravda.sk](#) (#coronavirus), [pluska.sk](#) (coronavirus), [dennikn.sk](#) (Coronavirus), [Hnonline.sk](#) (Coronavirus COVID-19), [cas.sk](#) (Coronavirus), [dnes24.sk](#) (corona) and [topky.sk](#) (Coronavirus in Slovakia), which, according to the IABmonitor audit, reached a monthly traffic of more than 2 million users in the monitored period. This made them the most quantitatively significant among the news media in constructing argumentation strategies in the public debate in the Slovak Republic in the first phase of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. These texts were supplemented by other news media, which also contributed to this topic by media presentation. The research sample consisted of the texts with identified argumentation strategies with eco-social contextualizing indications, the references of which are presented continuously in the footnotes.

The main research question (MRQ) is: What are the trans-semantic links created by eco-social approach application to solving social problems during the coronavirus pandemic?

2. Results and their interpretation

The main research question aimed to ascertain the trans-semantic links created by the application of an eco-social approach to solving social problems during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Selected argumentation strategies and discourse fragments are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Selected argumentation strategies and discourse fragments related to MRQ

Argumentation strategy	Discourse fragment	Source
Topos of numbers	<i>The COVID-19 cases and the death rate as well as number of affected countries are expected to increase more rapidly in the near future.</i>	https://www.topky.sk/cl/11/1868257/PRAVE-TERAZ-WHO-potvrdivo--ze-novy-koronavirus-je-oficialne-pandemia
Topos of history	<i>The two influenza pandemics in the second half of 20th century had almost no impact on the global economy. Needless to say, the global economy has completely transformed since then."</i>	https://e.dennikn.sk/1831101/aklabudu-ekonomicke-dosledky-pandemie-co-vieme-a-co-nie/
Topos of usefulness	<i>A face mask is not a magical piece of armour. It does not guarantee complete immunity to the spreading of infection. It, however, offers protection not only to the wearer, but also to their closest connections. Everyone will be protected if used by everyone.</i>	https://video.sme.sk/c/22372040/preco-nosit-rusko-a-ako-startovat-rusko-video.html

The trans-semantic eco-social precondition to solving social problems is represented here as an eco-social approach blending various theories and approaches in social work that are in line with expectations to long-term sustainability. These emphasize that it is important to accept a holistic and systematic perspective on social problems and the mutual relationship between lifestyle and environment (Germain, Gitterman, 1980). The global spread of the new coronavirus disease COVID-19 (topky.sk, 2020) proves this approach of solving social problems to be appropriate. Measures taken locally during the first wave of the pandemic had global impact. They forced those working abroad to answer questions related to their social identity around whether take the steps to return to their home country or not and reintegrate into their native social system. The COVID-19 pandemic poses a major threat to global systems of public health according to Alanagreh, Alzoughool and Atoum (2020). The increasing number of cases and deaths in the first wave of the pandemic warned society that even the worst-case scenario is likely to happen. Even though the knowledge of the SARS-CoV-2 infection cycle is shared globally, the treatment strategy for the COVID-19 patients remains unclear. The first wave of the coronavirus pandemic can be labelled as an unforeseen event with a major impact on global society. The event

belongs to the so-called “black swan” events and there are several criteria for their identification (Taleb, 2011):

- the event comes as a surprise to the observer and is not a common event,
- the event has a considerable impact,
- there is a rationalization phase.

Such perspectives on the nature of social problems have profound significance not only in terms of terminology but also in the actual social intervention process. There is an interconnection between the biological and social (material and human) aspects e.g. in a controlled global relation forming process, where the working precariat “is just an unattractive trash of global oppressive society (Suša, Hrubec et al., 2017, p. 144). A statement of similar pragmatic metahumanism, sounding equally radical, claims that waste causes troubles only if it piles up. In natural/social contexts, this means that as the piled up waste is transported to incineration plants to be taken care of, the existence of pandemics similar to SARS-CoV-2 (Baláž, 2020) is considered a “recovery for the economy” by a part of the social elite. The economic impact of the pandemic is crucial for sustainability of economic self-sufficiency evaluation from the global economy perspective in both the pandemic and the post-pandemic periods. The first wave of the pandemic accentuated self-sufficiency in the field of medical and hygiene aids, food and agricultural products, drugstore products as well as everyday consumer goods and services.

Setting universally accepted rules in such a contradictory situation is extending to the formal aspect (law making process) and creation of the informal rules. Internalization of infra-penalty (Foucault, 2000, p. 289) seems to be the trans-semantic link to this process. “It incorporates informal standards into everyday life and means that the rules are not considered to be followed but simply lived, automatically respected and reproduced” e.g. the obligation to wear a face mask (Matkovská, Kozinková, Rybár, 2020) in the beginning of the pandemic. As the time progresses, this topic starts to be seen from the perspective of human rights. Problems that recently received high media coverage referred to the degree to which wearing a face mask was considered satisfactory and how could the obligation be enforced, what are the exceptions to wearing a face mask and others. This terminologically anchored perception of informal standards is in compliance with an eco-social approach, mostly with such frequently used terms as ordinariness and lifeworld. Accepting the set rules as a way to empower the social client in solving the social problems implies the possibility to use the term “biopower” focusing on encouragement, strengthening, control, oversight and increase in organization and the ratio of forces subject to it (as in: Kakuk, 2017). First and foremost, it is the “unlocking” of the client in order to use their human potential when solving their own social situation.

3. Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to interpret what the presented research findings confuse in relation to ecosocial approaches to solving social problems during the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, especially in the area of their trans-semantic context.

The starting point for conceptualising of the relationship between social work as a helping profession and the social practice is the necessity to get acquainted with the clients' normal everyday routine before addressing the problematic situations they are facing. Getting to know the "live world" of the social work clients during the Corona crisis means to identify what really determines their life. These factors include profanation of the world, i.e. underestimating or even disparaging the importance of the meaningful things in their life during the Corona crisis; for example, the importance of maintaining contact with the social environment for the senior citizens (RED, 2020). According to Zolnikov and Furio (2020), social distancing was implemented as a primary intervention to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and hamper spreading of the virus. From the ecosocial point of view, social distancing provides an opportunity to decide (who to meet, where to go, how to spend time in home isolation, etc.), but also time to reflect upon our identity: who we are, where we belong, and where we are heading to. Although social distancing is good for halting the virus, the lack of social interaction can lead to certain issues. These issues can cause some people to disparage the infected individuals or even change the overall social mindset towards questioning the values, moral relativism, or "moral entrepreneurship". The negative consequences directly affect the way social problems are addressed. They include profanation of science, education, healthcare, or even the ordinary way of life. Seeing consumption as a civil right is egoistic on the individual level and on the society-wide level, it generates pressure to increase the unstable economic growth and consumption itself, which is not sustainable in the long-term. Ecological, ecosocial, and economic sustainability of our current way of life has become an important topic of the public debate. It could be observed during the first wave of the novel Coronavirus pandemic. An example of such debate was shopping during the Corona crisis (Topky.sk, 2020) – a social change was called for. Social practice applying the ecosocial approach needs to transform as does the everyday life as such.

In the analysis of ecosocial approach and the way they affect the social problems during the pandemic, the temporal and financial aspects are important. Creating a productive and effective solution to social problems using ecosocial approaches (mainly in the context of deep ecology) requires us to realize that the participants in these processes need time to reach the highest cognitive intensity

possible (Newport, 2016, p. 93) – the desired state in which the relevant solutions to social problems are actually found and applied. Successful management of an emergency state requires enough time to take the necessary steps and eliminate the problematic situations. In this case, the chain of equivalence would look like this: long-term – intensity – solution. In containing the SARS-COV-2 pandemic, it means long-term and nation-wide compliance with the measures that prevent uncontrolled spreading of the virus (Trnava, 2020). Interconnecting the social and ecological aspects, i.e. introducing measures, generates costs that can be covered by the government (SME. Ekonomika, 2020) or take the form of shared social suffering (webnoviny, 2020; Walerstein et al., 2016, p. 203)

4. Conclusion

This research based on critical discursive analysis of social reality is mainly focused on characteristics associated with the application of ecologically oriented social work. Its application was demonstrated on the example of solving social problems during the first phase of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic in the Slovak Republic. The conclusion is focused on answering the main research question, to inform about the implementation of nationwide research covering the strictest measures taken after the first diagnosed case of COVID-19, to offer recommendations for research and practice of social work related to solving social problems. These problems correspond with eco-social approaches in social work as well as proposals for social changes and they take into consideration experiences during the first wave of the new coronavirus pandemic in terms of applying eco-social approaches to solve social problems.

Answering the main research questions:

What are the trans-semantic links created by eco-social approach application to solving social problems during the coronavirus pandemic?

On the basis of the presented results, the following links can be stated:

- the eco-social approach was reflected in the context of immunological paradigm change confirmed when using the topos of numbers (number of infected and victims) in argumentation strategies related to the importance of pandemic and taken measures.
- using the topos of history (consequences of previous global pandemics) to form regulated global relations under the influence of “healing” pragmatic metahumanism and thus supporting “healing” economic measures.
- internalization of infra-penalty as a part of the biopower use as a means to empower the social client in solving social problems via the topos of usefulness when justifying the importance of anti-epidemic measures.

Other research was conducted during the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the Slovak Republic. The Institute for sociology of SAS conducted the series of research studies “Ako sa máte, Slovensko?” (How are you, Slovakia?) of which the first two were undertaken from March to April 2020. These research studies were made during the strictest measures established after the first diagnosed case of COVID-19 in Slovakia. Research studies “Ako sa máte, Slovensko?” (How are you, Slovakia?) undertaken from March 2020 and April 2020 are available online in the Slovak archive of social data (<http://sasd.sav.sk/sk/aktuality.php?id=1363&r=1>). Both studies were conducted by quota selection from the MNFORCE company online panel. The sample was selected to represent the following socio-demographic factors: sex, age, region, size of the place of residence and level of education. The research covers only part of the population that have access to the internet. Therefore, older respondents without internet access are absent from the research. The research “Ako sa máte, Slovensko? March 2020” shows the situation after the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Slovakia on 6 March 2020. At the time of data collection (6 March 2020) there was an obligation to wear a face mask in Slovakia. Schools and shops (except for groceries, pharmacies, medical supply stores, chemist’s, petrol stations, banks, posts and some others) were closed before the data collection. The research is focused on public concerns about the disease, expected duration of the epidemic, consent and adherence to quarantine measures and changes in behaviour during the epidemic. Concerns about work, income situation changes, changes in leisure activities and family relations are collected as well. In addition, it also shows respondents’ different shopping behaviour in that period (MNForce, March 2020). The second research “Ako sa máte, Slovensko?, April 2020” is focused on quarantine measures taken during the second month after the first diagnosed case of COVID-19 Slovakia on 6 March 2020. The ban of movement between districts during Easter ended one week before the data collection. It was the most restrictive quarantine measure taken in Slovakia at that time. The research is focused on public concerns about the disease, expected duration of the epidemic, consent and adherence to quarantine measures and changes in behaviour during the epidemic, approving the measures and government interference in personal liberty. Concerns about work, income situation changes, changes in leisure activities and family relations are collected as well. These questions were asked also in a piece of compatible research named ‘Austrian Corona Panel Project’ carried out at the same time in Austria (MNForce, April 2020).

At the end of this paper we suggests social changes that take into account the experience during the coronavirus crisis in terms of the application of eco-social approaches to solving social problems:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased social isolation and separation from the natural world. According to Willoughby (2020) Social work practices should be more inclusive of the natural environment in the person-in-environment framework. Ecosocial work addresses the importance of the natural environment in social work practice. Interventions for engaging the natural environment in social work practice are explored. Connecting to the natural environment can be beneficial for personal and professional growth. The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that has provided time for reflection to reassess our relationship to nature. Social workers have the opportunity to incorporate biophilia and deep ecology for personal and professional growth. Moving forward to a post-pandemic world, recommendations to further engage with nature, particularly in urban settings, are considered.
- To optimize connection between medical and social care during the pandemic (e.g. synergic coordination of medical staff and social workers when testing clients and employees in social service facilities or marginalised community members, effective cooperation of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in asserting measures that promote public health protection).
- To increase functional participation of social workers in the pandemic outbreaks (e.g. community social work in Roma slums under quarantine, permanent workload of employees in social service facilities with detected SARS-CoV-2 infection, involvement of the Slovak Chamber of Social Workers and Social Work Assistants in the process of accepting and implementation of measures concerning social work target groups).

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