



Paweł Czarnecki

ISM Slovakia

E-mail: pawel@czarnecki.co

The definition of social work / *Definicja pracy socjalnej*

Abstrakt

The object of social work are both the individuals and social groups (families or more extended communities). Depending on which groups of people require help, social work arouses various requirements which from the point of view of the social workers' education create the need for specialisation. One can distinguish several specific groups of the clients of social work: children, the old age people (gerontological nursing), ill and disabled individuals and local communities. Special problems and challenges appear when a child is its object. It happens that because in the case of children separating interim help or long-term financial assistance from the pedagogic influence is impossible, and thus from responsibility for charges' future. Social workers do not bear full responsibility for the state of child's future, because they share this responsibility with different subjects, it does not mean, however, that they do not bear it at all. One can distinguish two extreme positions among the theoreticians of social work: according to one of them, represented among others by H. Radlińska, social welfare institutions totally take over the responsibility for the child's future, what is connected with the limitation of freedom, and according to the latter, such a responsibility, in practice, is not possible.

Key words: social work, social sciences

The notion "social work" appeared in the United States in 1917 for the first time under the name of the institution dealing with charitable activities. The hitherto existing name *National Conference of Charities and Corrections* was replaced by *National Conference of Social Work*. This change was caused by professionalisation of social help which ceased to be a kind of social charity and became an occupation at the beginning of the 20th century. At present, it is a system activity having a cross-society dimension aimed at providing support to other people.¹ Hence social work is a professional activity, and it means that not every kind of assistance provided for people in a difficult life situation one may define as social work. Either way a definition of social work is so simple from the point of view of the institutions providing social help: a person who practices social work or a related one is called a social worker. In the Classification of Occupations and Occupational Specialities announced by Office for National Statistics in the group "social help workers and social workers" the following occupations are specified: "a personal assistant to a disabled person, a care assistant in a care home, an environmental carer, a social worker, the remaining social service workers and social workers."

1 Por. K. Wódz, *Praca socjalna w środowisku zamieszkania*, Wydawnictwo Śląsk, Katowice 1995, 15.

The occupation a social work expert was also specified in the group “Experts on all social matters” (which also includes the following occupations: “a probation officer, a family expert (a family specialist), a mediator, a tutor in penitentiary institutions, remaining experts on all social matters.”²

From the above mentioned enumeration results that not every kind of help provided by the state institutions by trained workers is social work. First of all, you should distinguish social work from rehabilitation. The latter is a kind of educational impact aiming at causing socially maladjusted individuals to respect generally accepted social and legal standards. In general, penal institutions are the location of rehabilitation, however, sometimes social work concerns the same individuals and is run at the same time as rehabilitation. The families living in poverty whose members infringe the law and are placed under probation officer’s supervision are sometimes an example. In social work often appears the same problem as in rehabilitation because a long-lasting condition of poverty leads to characterological changes making difficult, or indeed making impossible a departure from a difficult situation.³ It is also necessary to mention here about the post-penitentiary care which can be acknowledged as a kind of social work. Environmental rehabilitation is a separate kind of the activity.

Social work is not identical with socio-therapy either, though it may contain elements of the latter. Socio-therapy is a therapeutic impact, hence a kind of treatment of a definite type of disorders. It aims at creating, restoring, modifying or extending definite social skills of an individual, i.e., his or her ability to function in a group (family, school, professional environment, and the like). Therefore, socio-therapy is a kind of psychotherapy, though a social group also may be sometimes its aim, being a cause of its members’ social dysfunctions. The related impact of socio-therapy constitutes interpersonal training addressed to people whose social skills do not go beyond the norm.⁴

With social work is connected a therapy and prophylaxis of addictions. It happens because a drug or alcohol addiction becomes the cause of problems both in the individual and social dimension, often leading to poverty and homelessness.⁵ That is why the addicted individuals and the ones who broke away from an addiction and wish to return to normal life become social workers’ clients.

That is why it is also necessary to distinguish social work from social pedagogy which as distinct from social work is a theoretical discipline. Social pedagogy simply explores human needs in the separate stages of life, applying a special meaning to a situation such as orphanhood, violence in the family, breaking up the family, and the like, in which social help turns out to be necessary. Social pedagogy treats an individual, first of all, as a creature shaped as a result of the influence exerted by the social environment, hence it sets a great store by an exploration of the edu-

2 <http://www.stat.gov.pl/klasyfikacje/kzs/kzs.htm>.

3 Por. B. Urban, J. M. Stanik, *Resocjalizacja: teoria i praktyka*, PWN, Warszawa 2007.

4 Por. *Nowy Słownik pedagogiczny*, pod red. W. Okonia, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, Warszawa 2007.

5 Por. np. B. T. Woronowicz, *Uzależnienia. Geneza, terapia, powrót do zdrowia*, Media Rodzina, Poznań 2009.

cational environment. Social pedagogy is a particularly important field for social work in conditions when it comes to quick social and economic changes. We had to deal with such changes in Poland after 1990. Therefore, without any exaggeration, one can now acknowledge this discipline as a theoretical basis of social work. Also providing help for ill and disabled people is not always the same as social work, because in many cases help for the individuals with ailments requires specialist medical knowledge which social workers do not possess.

It is also worth turning your attention to social work that is admittedly a profession which performing requires suitable qualifications, however, as practice shows, this occupation can also perform people without any formal training. Such individuals also often act in the framework of voluntary service which takes generally organised forms, and thanks to it, voluntary workers work under supervision, however, sometimes they work individually. You should underline here that voluntary service is, to any extent, neither interim help nor short-term one, just the opposite, it is a kind of a systematic long-term assistance, and it does not differ from social work.

Therefore, it turns out that there is no way to determine the exact boundaries between social work and such occupations as a psychotherapist, a nurse, a prison tutor, and the like. However, the notion "social work" often tends to be used not only as a definition of a certain occupation, but also as a certain kind of an activity.⁶ Therefore, defining the notion of social work in another meaning turns out to be a task far more difficult. This difficulty results from complexity and changeability of the activity. One can sometimes encounter with a notion "social help," which seems to function as a synonym of the notion of social work in a colloquial language. Nonetheless, Helena Radlińska⁷, one of the doyennes of the Polish social work, has noticed that the notion of care is ambiguous, because it encompasses help, life-saving and social help. In turn, different authors acknowledge life-saving, protection for people in a difficult life situation and help as the long-lasting support for the development of individuals and groups.⁸

It could be helpful here a distinction between social work as an occupation and social help which one could define as every kind of organised help aiming at improving a life situation of individuals and social groups. All interim actions organised by local communities or institutions in the case of natural disasters or different types of random events are the example of social help in this meaning. The fundraiser organised by the local community for a family who have lost their whole property in fire would be social help from this point of view, however, it would not be social work. According to a different approach, the notion of social help is wider than the notion of social work and encompasses the whole of the institutional activities aiming at achieving by individuals and a social group a satisfactory standard of living, health condition, development potential, and the like.

6 B. Szatur-Jaworska, *Teoretyczne podstawy pracy socjalnej*, w: T. Pilch, I. Lepalczyk, *Pedagogika społeczna. Człowiek w zmieniającym się świecie*, Warszawa 1993, s. 91.

7 Por. I. Lepalczyk, *Helena Radlińska. Życie i twórczość*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2000

8 B. Szatur-Jaworska, *Teoretyczne podstawy...*, s. 92 i nast.

Therefore, the aim of social help is broadly understood welfare of individuals and social groups.

Notwithstanding the way we define social work as a profession and in what way we classify separate kinds of actions of which social work consists, a definition of the essence of this work depends on such factors as the existence of definite needs and expectations in society, and also resources and potentiality of social groups and whole societies. From the formal point of view in social work, as in every kind of action, one can distinguish a subject, an object, an aim and a method. In this case, social institutions and workers employed are the subject, but individuals or social groups are the object (the most often the family and various kinds of local communities, but also society as such). The aim of social work is help in satisfying basic living needs, adjustment to the rules of social life, social death prevention, and the like. By the method of social work it is necessary to understand a kind of action undertaken by the subject (a worker or workers' group) in order to achieve the aim.

As a matter of fact, these kinds of general formulations require a comment, the more that the above mentioned differences take various forms in social work practice. According to the often mentioned definition created by B. Dubois and K. Krogsrud Miley, social work is an action aiming at improving life conditions in the individual and social dimension, solving social problems and appeasing of suffering. Social workers aim at endeavouring to improve quality of life for the individuals and social groups through broadening the range of possibilities for the charges' actions, enlarging an access to aid means and also an education of the whole society. As a matter of fact, this definition is too general, and that is why defining specific tasks and duties of a social worker, which would be based on it, was not possible.

In a more general way social work was defined by H. Radlińska: "Bringing out strengths both from an individual and human groups is the essence of today's social work."⁹ R. A. Skidmore and M. G. Thackeray point out, however, that the main task of social help is assistance for the individuals in better functioning in society. In turn, the General Assembly of the International Federation of Social Workers, Montreal, Canada adopted in 2000 the following definition: "Social work is an occupation which promotes social changes, solving problems in mutual human relationships, and strengthening and liberating people that they could achieve affluence. Taking advantage of the theory of human behaviours and social systems, social work interferes exactly there where it comes to people's interaction with their environment."¹⁰ It results from the above mentioned definitions that the aim of social work is, generally speaking, the quality of life. One can formulate the generalisation based on the two first definitions, according to which the quality of life depends not only on material conditions, but also on social relationships, psychical factors, and even spiritual ones, therefore, social help also encompasses all these spheres. In turn, the two remaining definitions point out to social relationships as the cause of a low quality of life.

9 H. Radlińska, *Istota i zakres służby społecznej*, „Opiekun Społeczny” 1947, nr 4, s. 224.

10 www.ifsw.org.

On the other hand, it is necessary to underline that social work should limit to these forms of assistance which are really indispensable. However, in practice, a definition which help is indispensable turns out to be unusually difficult and a worker limiting to solving only the most visible problems (e.g. alleviation of conflicts among family members, paying off debts, solving conflicts with neighbours) can easily mix cause up with effect. In consequence, the problems will be solved for a time, and then they will appear again.

Social work is a professional activity, therefore, as every occupation requires theoretical and practical preparations. There is a subject called "social work" at many universities, and it requires from its graduates both specialist knowledge and general knowledge about a human being. General knowledge from the range of philosophy, sociology, psychology and pedagogy allows us to get to know man and understand his needs. Basic biological knowledge is also required from a social worker because correct functioning of man depends, to a high extent, on biological processes setting in his organism. Because social work is an institutional activity taking place in the definite legal and economic system, basic knowledge from the fields of law and economy is also necessary. In the range of specialist competences, among other things, the skills of solving problems resulting from poverty, family violence, homelessness, unemployment, addictions, immigration, and the like. It is needless to say that a social worker should know the professional nomenclature from the range of social work and social pedagogy and replenish his knowledge by reading specialist literature. It is necessary to underline that in social work, except for theoretical knowledge and practical skills passed on suitable courses, the worker's personal life experience plays an unusually important role.

The graduates of "social work" can undertake work at such institutions as regional social policy centres, district family assistance centres and social welfare centres, educational care facilities, institutions for the elderly and disabled individuals, organisational institutions for employment and unemployment counteraction, support centres in institutions for homeless people, alcoholics and drug addicts, centres for refugees, non-governmental organisations, and the like. It is necessary to underline that social work as the kind of the professional, organised help has its source in definite social norms ordering carrying help for those who are not able to overcome difficulties. Therefore, performing the social worker's occupation requires a definite flair for it, such as magnanimity and compassion, and especial sensibility manifesting itself in the need of helping others.

The individual benefiting from social workers' help is defined as a "client." Taking care of the client's good through satisfying his vital, psychological and social needs is a social worker's duty because in every case these needs are different, therefore, social work should be adapted to the client's individual needs. In different words, a social worker does his work in the appropriate way when he is able to match specific needs and the client's expectations. The relationship between a social worker and a client is based on confidence. The client is dependent on a social worker, to a greater or lesser extent, therefore, if we do not restrict the notion of social work to such basic actions as a mediation in passing on financial assistance, help in

maintaining personal hygiene, and the like, then the client's confidence becomes a necessary condition of the effectiveness of social worker's actions. It means that a client should have the possibility of submitting a complaint on the social worker doing his job unethically, from the point of view of institutions organising social work, and be sure that disciplinary actions will be taken against the worker.