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The theory of social work

Abstract

In this article the theory of social work will be discussed more specifically. By «theory of social work» I mean the field of science, the subject of which is the practice of social work. The primary aim of this article is to present it as the science and not only describe various theories developed in the context of this doctrine.

Key words: social work, social sciences

n this article the theory of social work will be discussed more specifically. By "theory of social work" I mean the field of science, the subject of which is the practice of social work. The primary aim of this article is to present it as the science and not only describe various theories developed in the context of this doctrine.

Before moving on to discuss the theory of social work as a science, we turn attention to certain difficulties inherent in this type of projects. It is first and foremost about the problems associated with the ambiguity of the basic concepts, which of necessity must be used in this kind of characteristics. Let us, for example, note that the definition of social work as a set of steps leading to a particular purpose, in fact, is highly inaccurate, as this concept contains such terms as the "action" and "purpose", and many other equally ambiguous. These concepts can be found in many areas of knowledge (ethics, psychology, sociology, etc.), which give them different and sometimes incompatible meanings. M. Ossowska notes that the concept of action can be understood in different ways depending on what is meant by the concept of motive and purpose of the action. The "motive", according to the author, can be understood as any action trigger, regardless of whether it is psychological or physical factor, internal or external, each factor triggering mental activity, a set of characteristics common to all men and underlying each measure (eg.

the pursuit of pleasure, avoiding unpleasantness), and finally the goal of the action. The concept of purpose may mean a state of affairs desirable from the point of view of those who take action, even if the person does not realize that (eg. a reflex of hand withdrawal once touched the hot object), the very idea of the desired state of things, a direct result of actions (eg. the state of affairs which are intermediate steps in achieving the ultimate goal), etc[1]. Speaking therefore about social work theory, methods, object etc., one should be aware that all of these concepts can be defined in different ways, and each definition of social work theory is merely a general approximation of what is actually being done in research work by the theorists.

One of the central issues of social work theory remains the relationship between theory and practice. It should be considered the correctness of the opinion according to which the theory of social work is the theoretical foundation of professional social assistance activities. Obviously there is no doubt that certain theoretical generalizations are the basis of practical activities, on the other hand, however, the theory of social work is a discipline growing so rapidly that constantly "precedes" the practice, seeking both new areas and forms of poverty and exclusion, as well as new methods to solve problems. Following the current debates within the social work theory it is hard not to get the impression that in large part they remain detached from the problems of social work practice.

One of the main tasks of the theory of social work is to develop a definition of social work practice. This definition can refer either to the idea of social work, or to the facts, ie. to the model of social work actually implemented in the social aid system. In both cases, defining social work, one must first define its purpose, object and method. Both the purpose and the object of social work, however, does not belong to the realm of facts, so they are not in fact the subject of the theory of social work in the sense in which we speak generally about the objects of various disciplines.

The validity of the theory to the practice of social work can be assessed in different ways. Like any field of science, including the theory of social work aims primarily for cognitive objectives, although there is no doubt that many of its theoretical propositions is used in practice. There are many theoretical concepts that will never be used in practice, moreover, the objective theory of social work is not only to seek solutions capable of being used in practice, but also to formulate generalizations and interpretations of the theoretical value only. Moreover, as noted Ch. Beckett, in the practice of social work are used theories so obvious and unequivocal that they should be rather considered as a sign of ordinary common sense than scientific theories *sensu stricto[2]*.

The relationship between the theory and practice of social work does not seem to rely solely on the fact that the theory provides the theoretical knowledge, while practice apply this knowledge in practice. But in order to answer the question of

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1 Cf. M. Ossowska, Motywy postępowania. Z zagadnień psychologii moralności, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 2002, p. 24 and next. The definitions given by Ossowska refers to the meanings which, according to the author, are most common in everyday language and psychological literature, but obviously they are not all the possible meanings.
2 Ch. Beckett, Podstawy teorii dla praktyków pracy socjalnej, Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Socjalnej, Warszawa 2010, p. 209.

whether and to what extent the social work theory is useful from the practical point of view, one has to determine what in fact is the theory.

Some difficulties may pose the ambiguity of the term "theory of social work." This term has two basic meanings. Firstly, it may mean a certain theory of social work, and so a system of statements that can be verified or falsified. It is the importance of what we mean when we say that a theory is applied in practice or theory that one turns out to be more useful than the other. Secondly, the term "theory of social work" means a particular area, the aim of which is to study the social conditions of the professional activity of social aid, which is the practice of social work. The theory of social work as a scientific discipline develops theories explaining the function and scope of social work as the aid activities, but its purpose is not exhausted during the search of general and theoretical explanations.

This distinction may appear insignificant, but it seems that it has some relevance to the practice of social work. It is the duty of social workers to continually expand and update their knowledge in various fields, obviously in theory of social work most of all. It does not mean, however, that each social worker is required to keep track of the current discussions in the field of social work theory. Such discussions generally do not have much relevance to social work practice, though they undoubtedly seek to develop possible solutions to practical implementations. This applies especially to the general issues related to the model of social work, social policy objectives, and the place of social work in the social welfare system, etc. It seems not feasible introduce into practice the concepts relating to specific problems not directly related to the practice of social work, eg. the proposals of amending various law regulations, discussions on the new forms of social work, etc. It seems, therefore, reasonable the proposal, according to which the task of scientists involved in the theory of social work should include preparation of publications intended for social workers, covering only this section of theoretical discussions, which may be important for practical action.

The theory of social work, as well as some other areas of science, is said sometimes to be a practical discipline, i.e. that the objective is not only recognition of the reality, but also its transformation. But does this practical function not contradicts the essence of science? Science is, however, a kind of knowledge which meet numerous strict conditions, which include objectivity in relation to the subject of the study. But how should it be possible to maintain the cognitive objectivity, if the purpose of the researcher is to transform the item tested in accordance with their own ideas of how that object should look like?

Let us start with the presentation of the dictionary definition of science. The term "science" means primarily the entirety of all sciences, wherein within this meaning one can extract two detailed meanings: science as the set of all scientific theories, regardless of whether they are currently accepted or deemed to be false, as well as science in sense of the current state of research within the various disciplines (i.e. excluding falsified and rejected theories). Secondly, science can be regarded as the scientific activity, hence the set of activities leading to the formulation of sentences

that are scientific theories. And thirdly "science" refers to the various disciplines, each of which has a separate object and its own research method.

In the latter meaning, the term "science" seems to have a normative connotation, as a scientific discipline may be just the kind of knowledge that meets certain criteria (communicability, intersubjective verifiability, etc.). Apparently to determine whether the given area is or is not a scientific discipline, therefore, does not seem to be difficult, but in fact it occurs that abovementioned scientific criteria tend to be interpreted in different ways, so that different ways of knowing and different areas of knowledge or discipline are considered scientific or not. A prime example is the philosophy which some philosophers considered for science, and some as the part of a field of knowledge distinct from science and tending to other purposes. Controversy also appear in connection with the so-called humanities, which are distinguished from the natural sciences because their theories cannot be either verified or falsified. Social sciences, in turn, which include social pedagogy and social work theory, are situated between the natural sciences, the subject of which is clearly defined, and the humanities concerned with the man as being self-conscious.

Let us go back to the practical dimension of social work theory. This discipline, like any science, has its own proper object, method and purpose. Characteristics of all these three elements can be a source of controversy, so it might be worth a detailed discussion of each of them. Due to the subject of consideration of social work theory one can identify three main groups of problems: problems of social work clients, the problems of social workers and the problems arising in relations between wards and social workers. In the literature on the theory of social work obviously other classifications can be found. Eg. by R. Sibeon, the theory of social work is engaged in social work itself, which seeks to answer the question of the nature of this work and what functions are performed in modern societies, or methods of social work, or explaining the nature of social problems[3].

This classification appears to have designing nature (similarly as the previous one), so in order to determine whether the authors of publications in the field of social work actually deal with these very issues (as well as to determine how much attention they devote to each of the individual groups of problems), it would be desirable to trace these publications over a longer period of time. Such a review should also take into account the publications appearing in different countries, due to the fact that social work is part of a specific social welfare system, and it is obvious that this has an impact on the research interests of social work theorists. This review of the literature would show with certainty how theorists of social work research interests change in the long run, would show the changes in the conceptual apparatus used to describe social work, it would expose the existing "trendy"[4] topics, which after some time will be forgotten, and above all, would

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3 Cf. R. Sibeon, Comments on the structure and form of social work knowledge, "Social Work and Social Sciences Review" 1 (1), p. 29 and next.
4 It is worth mentioning here that the distinction present in each discipline between striving for knowledge of the subject of the discipline and the criticism of the current proposals within the discipline. The appearance of intellectual "trends" concerns, it seems, mainly this second aspect of science. As an example, one can identify "feminist" theories. Cf. L. Dominelli, Feminist Social Work Theory and Practice, Palgrave Publishers Ltd., New York 2002.

determine the relationship between social work theory and institutional changes in the social welfare system.

The above-mentioned classifications do not take into account the difference between the social work as such and the specific social work systems. This distinction is important, as it allows to avoid the temptation of absolutizing specific forms of social work, i.e. treating strictly defined set of values, goals, methods and forms of social work valid in a particular social welfare system the pattern, which should aim at the development of social work everywhere where this set of values, goals, methods and forms is presented differently. Therefore it should be kept in mind that the theory of social work deals with both specific forms of social work and social work as such (the ideal of social work). In the latter case, the task is to determine the basic theory, the fundamental elements of social work, occurring regardless in which kind of social welfare system this work is done and the entities it is addressed to[5].

The tasks of social work theory includes also social needs studies, possible to meet through the efforts of social workers, as well as the study of the conditions in which social work proceeds. At this point, however, we come to one of the fundamental difficulties of social work theory and all disciplines that aim the impact on individual and collective life. Namely how to determine which individual and social needs are so important that they justify intervention of a social worker? There is no doubt that in the first step the biological needs should be satisfied, in any case, this should not be the task of social workers, practically it comes down to allocate specific funds for the purchase of food, clothing, cleaning , providing shelter, etc.

But what about the other needs, such as the need for security, belonging, personal development, participation in social and cultural life, etc.? There is still no universally accepted criteria for assessing which human needs are "essential" and which "irrelevant" or, in other words, what unsatisfied needs injures human dignity. Generally, one can assume, however, that every man strives for happiness regarded as e.g. a sensation of pleasure and not experiencing distress, a sense of satisfaction with life as a whole, subjective belief that one is needed, living life to the fullest and so on.

The theory of social work therefore does not have cognitive tools enabling identification of needs that should be satisfied with the social workers assistance. This applies equally (with few exceptions) to material needs, emotional and spiritual. In order, therefore, to indicate the purpose of social work, hence to satisfy these needs, social work theorists are faced with having to make arbitrary decisions based not so much on an objective, scientific knowledge, rather on their personal beliefs, their own worldview and their conception of man and society. This unscientific, strictly philosophical dimension of social work theory seems to be underestimated, while in fact it is the foundation of the discipline, because on how we characterize "welfare" units, and the ideal of the relationship between the individual and the social group, depends not only the scientific research method, but primarily the object of the study[6].

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5 Cf. D. H . Hepworth, R. H . Rooney, G. Dewberr Rooney, K. Strom-Gottfried, J. A. Larsen, Direct Social Work Practice. Theory and Skills, Brooks/Cole, Belmont 2006, p. 4.
6 One can also encounter attempts to the direct use of certain philosophical concepts in the

Although the concepts of social work should be distinguished from theories explaining the cause of the problems, which solving is the task of social work, one cannot forget that there is a close relationship between these two kinds of theories. In order to set a target of social work, after all, we define the nature and extent of the problems possible to solve through social work, it is obvious that these problems cannot be solved without the knowledge of their direct and indirect causes. For example, recognizing that the ultimate aim of social work is the well-being of society as a whole, we assume that social work is not directed to any particular social group, and its subject is the whole of society. We assume here that the original source of the problems experienced by individuals and social groups is the general state of society, thus wanting to definitively resolve these problems, we should look for opportunities and directions for the reform changing the way society functions. If, however, the goal of social work is considered as giving help only to selected social groups, it means that research on the causes of the problems should focus on these particular groups. Moreover, in the latter case, the theory of social work needs to create criteria to identify the groups of interest to the theory and practice of social work, these criteria are always based on assumptions about the purpose of social work[7].

It would be simplistic though to assume that the theory of social work is completely free to determine the objectives and the subject of social work practice. One can of course assume that the theory sets the targets of assistance activities in an arbitrary manner, not taking into consideration the actual state of society, its current needs, boundaries, problems etc., but then we risk that social work theory lose the relationship with the practice, and this would cause that the theory would become completely useless from the point of view of the practice. On the other hand total subordination of social work practice towards the objectives set by the theorists would result the fact, that serious household and social problems faced by social work clients would remain unresolved. In addition we would reduce the theory the social work discipline to a discipline that seeks the methods of achieving specific given targets, and that makes it cease to be a discipline that aims to study the social needs and becomes a kind of social technology.

On the other hand while setting long-term goals for social work, we cannot take into account just the current level of society development, this would mean that we are not able to clearly define the ideal society towards which all social reforms are heading. The ideal, as I mentioned, must be based on a specific conception of man and the current state of society must be considered as a starting point,

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theory of social work. T. Biernat proposes the use of the phenomenological approach to the social work theory. The author justifies the use of phenomenology in this field by that the phenomenology as the theoretical attitude does not have these disadvantages, which are subject to the dominant approach in the theory of social work. "Research carried out within the social work - he writes – is based on the assumption that human activity is the result of biological factors, socio and psychologically derived".

7 An example of the problem, which in practice may seriously hamper the achievement of purpose are communication barriers of gender. This problem was pointed out D. Dzianniak-Paulina i S. Pawlas-Czyż, concluding that "an important element in the education of social workers should be emphasis on the wider issues of gender". Cf. D. Dzianniak-Paulina, S. Pawlas-Czyż, Płeć, jako bariera komunikacyjna w pracy socjalnej, w: Socjologia i polityka społeczna..., p. 183.

not as a factor setting out the reform objectives. Such arbitrary definition of the objectives of social work is indeed an element of social engineering, which is part of social work even if these objectives are not be established in isolation from social practice. Although one can wonder whether social work projects aimed at reconstruction of society in such a way that social relations are not a cause of evil in the dimension of individual and group, are likely to be successful in the long term, however, it is impossible to deny that regardless of how we define the final and intermediate objectives of social work, this work aims to eliminate the evil in society, and thus seeks to build a perfect society, or one that is not itself a source of suffering.

The result of these considerations is that the theory of social work, in order to determine the purpose or purposes of practical social help activities, on the one hand must be kept in mind a certain ideal toward which should aim the development of society, on the other hand take into account the type and scale of current social problems. For example one can assume that the purpose of social work is to prevent social exclusion. In theory of social work, the concept of exclusion has become popular in recent years due to the fact that it allows to recognize the goals and tasks of social work in a much fuller and more versatile meaning than the concept of poverty, maladjustment or social pathology. Such a negative assessment of the purpose of social work, however, implies a number of important consequences, because it shows that social work would be superfluous, if the problem of exclusion did not exist, so e.g. if individuals at risk of exclusion received sufficient support from the nearest social environment.

Serious difficulties also arise while trying to answer the question of the subject of social work theory. As previously mentioned, according to some authors, its subject is the society as such and the goal – the search for ways to improve the standard of living in the dimension of the general public, according to other social work theory examines only selected areas of social life. These differences do not arise, however, with a different understanding of the tasks of social work, but with a different understanding of society and the role of the state in society.

One of the significant differences between social science and natural science consists is that the social sciences are much more dependent on the nature of the philosophical concept of man than natural science[8]. Depending on whether we consider man as a being capable of altruism, selfless dedication, which aims to fully develop, desiring to excel etc., or on the contrary – we take a pessimistic conception of human nature, according to which moral and legal norms are only harnessing human selfishness, we treat social work as an initiating activity and trigger latent positive energy in the individual or on the contrary, we treat it as a kind of extension of the oppressive influence of society on the individual, and therefore in the first place as a tool of attenuation of the natural, negative tendencies.

Considerations on the values that society should pursue, and therefore, albeit indirectly, on the objectives of social work, make ethics and political philosophy. But

8   As noted by M. Ossowska, the concept of human nature turns out to be useless for social sciences. M. Ossowska, *Motywy postępowania...*, p. 11 and next.

would it be appropriate to say that the theory of social work does not make its own cognitive efforts aimed at independent development of the concepts of the social work purposes? Differences between social welfare systems in different countries, among which mentioned should also be a different approach to the scope and function of social work, show that even if the reflection on the general trends in the development of societies is outside the scope of social work theory, this theory cannot move to the right living on different conditions, in which proceeds the realization of higher ideas in different countries.

One of the problems that must be solved in connection with the question of the possibility of the practical implementation of certain assumptions relating to the ideal society is the issue of the related risks. Analysis of these hazards, in turn, is not possible without considering the political context of social work. Many authors draws attention to the relationship between implemented in various countries model of social work and the historical and current political situation. Impact on the model of social work in various countries have on the one hand the process of industrialization, and on the other the political context in which this process occurred. According to R. Pinkel, there are two extremes of this political context: the one lack of state intervention, and the second submission process of industrialization under the control of the state as a whole. On these two extremes there is applied classification of countries according to the criterion of universality of civil rights: at one pole Pinkel situates countries whose governments have sought to create the basis for a possible broad social consensus, and the other countries ruled in an authoritarian manner which maintained a minimum consensus necessary to maintain power[9]. Models of social welfare and social work thus differs depending on the extent of state control over social life and the way a relationship of power in the country was formed in the past. This means that the total political neutrality of social work theory is impossible regarded as the absence of references to the political situation. Of course, one can point out many reasons for this state of things, which is characteristic not only for the social work discipline, and the exception in this respect is the fact that social work is the part of the social welfare system organized and supervised by the state.

Certainly thesis, according to which the theorists of social work should not take consideration of the direction of social reform, and the role of social work theory is merely to develop effective ways of realizing the objectives of the ongoing discussions on ethics, anthropology or political philosophy would be excessive. There is no doubt, however, that the theory of social work associations with certain conceptions of man and society are closer than we realize in general. In this respect, however, the theory of social work is no different from other areas, which aim to influence human (education, rehabilitation etc.), this is due not the entanglement of these areas in philosophical discussions as rather to the fact that the whole organization of modern societies is based on certain philosophical assumptions.

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9 Cf. K. Frysztacki, Pomoc człowiekowi – welfare – praca socjalna, in: Socjologia i polityka społeczna a aktualne problemy pracy socjalnej. Dylematy teorii i praktyki społecznej, red. K. Wódz i K. Piątka, Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne Akapit, Toruń 2004; R. Pinker, The Idea of Welfare, Heinemann, Heinemann, London 1979.

In the modern theory of social work seems to dominate the utilitarian approach. This means that the theorists treat social work as a method for solving certain types of problems (for the individual and social), assuming that solving these problems will make society better and happier. But this is not the only possible approach. The vast majority of authors assume, furthermore, that individual and social group is able to solve their own problems and meeting needs, as long as there are appropriate conditions. Among the conditions in the first place is mentioned satisfying material needs (providing food, clothing, shelter, employment assistance etc.) and mental (to support victims of violence, psychotherapy, etc.).

However, some authors believe this approach to be inadequate. E.g. M. Adamiec points out that the cause of the difficulties in daily existence is not always physical or mental health problems, often also because these problems are the result of unresolved conflicts of ideological, philosophical, and even metaphysical nature[10]. Note that the view according to which the cause of the difficulties of living in many cases belongs to the sphere of human spirituality, does not in itself constitute grounds for any practical social aid activities, but can explain why, despite the efforts of thousands of social workers and significant cost, even in most developed countries do not manage to solve the problem of poverty and exclusion.

One of the reasons for the discrepancies in the subject of social work theory are the differences within the psychological and sociological concepts accepted by the individual authors. Although neither psychology nor sociology are normative fields of knowledge, i.e. they are investigating the objects as I is, not as it should be, but the central (and obvious) idea adopted by all fields derived from the pedagogy is the thesis that both individuals and social groups are susceptible to change. So if we take a certain psychological theory (psychoanalysis, behaviorism etc.), thereby we approve a particular theory of sensitivity to change. In other words, the object of the theory of social work, so the area of individual and social activity, which is subjected to change and which can therefore be affect, presents differently depending on the theory explaining such phenomena as the process of learning, personality development, socialization and so on.

As I mentioned, it can be assumed that the interest of the theory of social work is the welfare of society as a whole (social work model based on such assumption functions in the Nordic countries[11]). Even someone who accepts this assumption must take into account the fact that the practice of social work is always addressed to individuals belonging to certain groups. It is obvious that the public in the sense of all the people living in a country is not a single whole, but consists of a number of groups which differ from each other in almost every way. Therefore, tracing the literature in the field of social work we can easily see that the vast majority of publications are not on the general problems of the functions and purposes of social work in the community, but specific problems (alcoholism, drug addiction, home-

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10 M. Adamiec, Pomaganie: problemy i uwagi. Psychologia pomocy, w: Psychologia pomocy. Wybrane zagadnienia, red. K. Popiołek, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 1996, p. 21 and next.

11 Discussion of the theoretical implications associated with this approach to social work can be found in the publication of P. Chatterjee, Approaches to the Welfare State, NASW Press, Washington 1996.

lessness, unemployment, old age problems etc.). Such "overrepresented" issues of social pathologies is due to the fact that in case of pathology the problem of social work leaves no doubt in principle. If the unit is not in a position to take care of their own existential needs, and also takes destructive measures both to itself and its social environment, the answer to the question about unmet needs or unsolved problems become obvious.

As a result, one of the central issues of social work theory becomes a problem of social dysfunction[12]. Furthermore, the fact that the theory of social work is so extensively devoted to the problems of dysfunction, seems to be derived from the correct conviction that any reforms aimed at improving the functioning of society should start in those areas where the aberrations are the deepest and apparently visible. In the initial period of the professional social work seemed that due to the economic growth and the efforts of social workers, the problem of poverty and social exclusion will be definitely solved as well as the associated problem of social pathologies will disappear. It soon became apparent, however, that despite the existence of elaborate systems of social assistance and social work, the complete elimination of poverty and social exclusion is not feasible, nor even the reduction of social pathologies (in cases like drug addiction or alcoholism). This in turn puts the theory of social work in the new situation, because it must explain the fact that in modern societies there are areas of poverty and exclusion, which cannot be eliminated despite the efforts developed by the system of social work. The question arises whether social work theory is able to make such an explanation, it is necessary to refer to a theory of modern, developed society, and the formulation of such a theory is beyond the competence of this theory. This in turn may constitute an argument against the view, according to which social work should be limited to solve short-term problems preventing the proper functioning of individuals or groups in the social environment, and at the same time confirming the thesis that without fundamental reforms changing the foundations of modern societies is not possible to remove the problems that cover only certain social groups, but threaten the society as a whole.

I mentioned above that the theory of social work practice sets out the objectives of the aid effort in a more or less arbitrary manner. Such an approach to the problem would mean, however, that it is not a scientific discipline, for the purpose of science is to explore the world as it is, not the transformation of reality according to preconceived ideas. To what extent, therefore, is the social work theory a field of knowledge, an extension of the philosophy and social engineering?

Having accepted certain assumptions about the nature of the individual and the community, and subjecting these assumptions with critical reflection in the perspective of the available methods and forms of professional aid activities, the social work theory is rather a quasi-philosophical discipline, seeking to implement in

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12 The concept of social dysfunction can be understood in the narrower or wider sense. In a narrower sense, the concept of this means the inability to maintain a "normal" (i.e. in line with the social norms) social relations, in a wider sense - any behavior or situation that makes it impossible to fully participate in the social and cultural life. In the latter sense, it is synonymous with the concept of social exclusion.

practice the ideas generated by human philosophy and ethics. But one must not forget that the theory of social work derives not only from the achievements of philosophy, but also from other areas, moreover, uses the same methods as those areas. The theory of social work, above all, is an empirical science in the same sense as sociology or psychology. Its basic cognitive tool is a survey, by using which this discipline encounters the same difficulties as all other areas which use this method. The primary difficulty is to distinguish the real attitudes, behaviors and opinions of respondents from their declarations during the survey. Although there are advanced methods of preparation of such studies and interpretation of the results, they do not give complete control over the surveyed sample. Other problems are related with the separation the sample we want to test[13].

Surveys in social work theory are carried out only when the problem is defined. But how does it come to the formulation of this problem? It seems that, as in many other areas of social work theory, there are two types of problems. The first kind are the problems concerning the phenomena occurring within the various social groups (e.g. social workers, nursing home residents, volunteers, etc.). Problems of this kind usually comes down to the question of whether the phenomenon occurs in the study group, and if so, with what intensity. It is not that important on what basis we formulate a conjecture about the possibility of the occurrence of the phenomenon (the results of studies of other phenomena, colloquial observations, the occurrence of similar phenomena in other social groups, etc.).

The second group of problems are the questions arising from the various theories of social work. If, for example, if we treat social work as a planned process of change and distinguish in it the step of the problem diagnose and the decision to intervene, assessment, planning, control, operation assistance (social intervention), monitor progress, work evaluation, then the purpose of the survey can be to answer the flowing questions: whether all of these steps are found in all forms of social work, how much time avg. do the social workers spend on the performance of each of the steps, which is the most important step in working with different categories of wards etc. The empirical studies do not in this case try to solve the problem as such, but they try to assess and evaluate given theory of terminating particular problem (in the abovementioned example the problem was the structure of the process of social support).

For the vast majority of sciences using empirical research, if in the course of empirical research it appears that the tested theory accurately describes and explains the real actions of social workers, then we can talk about the verification theory, if not, then the theory can be considered falsified. However, in the case of social work theory, the problem of verification or falsification scientific theories poses some additional difficulties due to the fact that social work is an intentional activity and the target can be achieved to a greater or lesser extent. Therefore, since the practical usefulness of the theory turns out to be graduated, so verification theory cannot be the same as the proof of its practical utility. Otherwise, we would have to know that the theory may be true in part, and because in social work almost every

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13 The problems of social sciences discusses S. Nowak in *Metodologia badań społecznych*, PWN, Warszawa 1985.

theory applied in practice leads to some extent to the desired changes, therefore we would not be able to grade any theory as completely true or completely false.

This fact is an important argument against the treatment of the theory of social work as an independent research discipline. Indeed, if a field of knowledge is not able to make theorems that can be regarded as being true or false, then the field is simply not science. One can indeed be objected that there are philosophical concepts of science, which undermine the ability of science to the true description of reality, this claim does not apply, however, to the argument discussed here because the argument is of logical nature (i.e. relates to the very possibility of recognition of sentences to be true or false, not the meaning of the term "truth").

This problem occurs not only when trying to determine the cognitive status of the theory of social work. It applies equally to all areas of pedagogy and pedagogy related fields, and this is precisely the theory of social work. It seems that one of the possibilities to solve this issue is to differentiate between scientific theories *sensu stricto* and theorems, which admittedly are formulated in the form of hypotheses and scientific theories, but in fact they are not the theories, rather the descriptions of the methods of effective action, where on closer analysis one can reveal the presence of the imperative sentences (such as "one should do x"). It also seems that some of the theories can be interpreted both as scientific theories and as the sets of instructions for effective action, which seems to stem from the fact that they constitute an attempt to describe and interpret certain phenomena, attempt their evaluation (though not always expressed directly) and suggestions for action to change the *status quo*. From this perspective, empirical research in social work theory represent a tool for the description (analysis) of the tested situation and the other elements of the theory (interpretation leading to evaluation and proposals for modification) are the connecting element of social work theory on the one hand with ethics, on the other hand with social pedagogy.

Similar "philosophical" entanglement can be observed also at the level of the relationship between social work theory and psychology, sociology and pedagogy. The theory of social work not only uses of the achievements of science, but also accepts or rejects the assumptions that underlies those sciences relating to the "nature" of man. An example of such an assumption is the belief that man is a being capable of change towards a predetermined order or endeavoring to improve its position, etc. Based on the knowledge of man provided by psychology and sociology, social work theory adopts the limitations of these sciences. Psychology is accused to pay too little attention to the impact of social relationships on individual behavior, sociology, however, to consider western developed societies as universal, not taking into account the possible existence of societies based on different principles. It seems, therefore, that a selection of the specific psychological or sociological theories to explain certain phenomena, on the basis of which the social work theory wants to develop their own generalizations and present proposals to solve problems, is to a significant extent the arbitrary decision of individual authors.

It is worth noting that the subject of social work theory, contrary to what its name

suggests, is not limited to the practice of social work. One can even have doubts as to whether the subject is a theory of social work as a professional social work assistance activities. It is worth noting that the first publication, which can be regarded as the beginning of a theoretical reflection on social work, began to appear simultaneously with the creation of professional social work, which is why we should regard it as mutually crossing and inspiring. The view, according to which the purpose of the social work theory is the study of social work activities, would have to be based on the assumption that there is a fundamental contrast between social work and its theory. In other words, we would have to assume that social work is a set of phenomena that we do not know and do not understand, whereas the purpose of theoretical research is the understanding of these phenomena, and this is simply in contradiction with the facts.

There is no doubt that the theory of social work deals with the problems which are being faced by the social work in practice. It is not purely cognitive domain, and the scope of its issues determines, in part, the practice. If, for example, it appears that social workers encounter communication barriers that hinder effective objectives achievement, the role of social work theory is to identify the causes of these barriers, explain the mechanisms of their formation and find methods to overcome them. If the common law makes it difficult to adjust the social work to changing conditions, the task of social work is to define the essence of these changes and to formulate proposals to improve the legal system. One can indicate many examples of such and they all show that the object of the theory of social work can become any problem as long as it proves to be important in practice.

Ch. Beckett believes that it is wrong to treat the theory in social work as a set of theorems similar to the scientific theory. "In fact - he writes - in the context of social work, it means (the theory concept, ed. aut.) something else. Almost never can be certainly stated what exactly caused the situation nor be able to say with certainty what will happen in the future[14]". This view therefore undermines the argument that social work theory provides a useful tool in solving everyday problems faced by social workers. This seems to be an important argument against the thesis that there is no direct connection between the practice and theory of social work.

It should be noted, however, that it is not the practice of social work that recognizes certain phenomena and problematize them in such a way that they become the subject of systematic research, but the theory. In other words, to determine what caused the problem of a particular case, it would require to collect detailed information on the context in which this problem occurred, determine the characteristics of individuals involved in the issue, examine social relations within which these individuals are etc., which of course is from a practical point of view impossible. This practical unenforceability does not mean, however, that it is impossible to identify the reasons which led to the situation that is the subject of social intervention. The theory of social work as a science does not investigate individual cases yet, but seeks to formulate generalizations and is, therefore, able to identify the likely causes for similar cases.

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14 Ch. Beckett, Podstawy teorii dla praktyków pracy socjalnej..., p. 45-46.

Another condition that must be fulfilled by any scientific theory, is the ability to make predictions for the future. Are the theories formulated by theorists of social work meet this condition? The answer to this question, contrary to appearances, is not obvious, because there are many different theories explaining the causes of the negative phenomena in social life and on the basis of each of them can be formulated both the specific predictions about the changes taking place within smaller or larger communities, as well as guidance on how to solve specific problems. One should also remember that one of the basic tools of social work is the direct impact of a social worker on an individual or group, so that social intervention can be to some extent compared to psychotherapy, where there is also a variety of approaches and methods that can be comparably effective in practice.

The question, therefore, arises whether the theory of social work practice directly affects or is capable of, at most, the impact on the overall shape of the system of social work in the country? It seems that it should be distinguished between the theory of social work as a fixed set of propositions which are also tips to practical action and the theory as a scientific discipline, to essence of which belongs the critical discussion. In the latter case, theoretical solutions are only the suggestions for discussion and is not intended to constitute practical guidelines for social work practitioners.

The practical utility of the theory of social work is not, therefore, in the fact that each theoretical proposal can be applied in practice. In addition, the theory has many practical implications that are not due to the pursuit of scientific cognition of reality and related only indirectly. The theory of social work develops primarily defined conceptual apparatus through which social workers can recognize specific problems. It is worth to note that the concept of "social work practice" belongs to the language of social work theory, for a distinction between theory and practice is possible only at the level at which we take a critical reflection on the actions of social workers. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that each social worker has a certain set of information, ideas and ideals concerning the methods and goals of social work that are related to his personal experience, it would be therefore an exaggeration to say that the language they use in their daily social work, is identical to the language of the social work theory.

Distinction between social work and social work theory entails the need to distinguish several other concepts. Methods of social work are not identical to the methods of social work theory, the first refers to the practice, the other to the test procedures used by theorists. The same applies to the concept and purpose: the aim of the theory of social work is the cognition, whereas the aim of the practice is a targeted impact on the individual and the group; the subject of the theory of social work are the needs of individuals and groups and how to meet them through aid activities, and the subject of practice are the needs as such.

Another function of the social work theory is to set standards of education of social workers (and thus the development of training programs for social work). Indeed speaking of professional social work, I do not mean any kind of assistance

provided to individuals or groups, but work that meets certain standards. Currently, the basic requirement is to have a formal qualification, which of course does not mean that at a time when such a formal conditions did not apply, there was no professional social work. The fact that a person who is formally a social worker, or having real qualification for social work, receives remuneration for work or is employed in an institution providing social work, is not important is in terms of these standards.

I mentioned above about relationships or dependencies of social work theory according on the political context. In connection with that relationship it should also be mentioned social work theory is not without influence on the social assistance schemes implemented in different countries. Without much exaggeration we can state that one of the objects of the theory of social work is the social policy carried out by the governments. The possibility of the practical use of theoretical concepts in this area are relatively the most significant because the system of social assistance and social work is generally organized precisely by the state, which means that it is relatively homogeneous in the whole country.

On the basis of these observations can be drawn the conclusion that the theory of social work is not the set of definitively fixed claims, assumptions and interpretations, but it is an area of knowledge that critically analyze their own results and is constantly looking for better and more adequate solutions to their own problems. It is not a discipline that is science in the strict sense of the word, as an important part of the ongoing discussion within it deals with issues that are on the verge of ethics, political philosophy, personal development[15] and other fields of knowledge involved in ideological disputes. On the other hand, however, it uses the methods of the social sciences, formulates theories explaining the phenomenon actually occurring in the social reality and allow to make forecasts for the future. From this point of view, the results are characterized by a high degree of probability, certainly no less than the results of other social sciences.

It must also be remembered that the way of understanding the purpose of social work and its scope depends on the general assumptions about social life. Depending on what view on the subject of social work theories we assume, differently we outline the scope and objectives of practical assistance activities. Assuming that social work is to promote social development and increase the level of prosperity, providing support to the elderly, the sick, etc. is not the task of social work (although it does not cease to be the task of social assistance), while the view that the role of social workers is only to solve current problems, means that social work does not cover these social groups, in which there is no occurrence of dysfunction.

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15 KOLEŇÁK, J.; POKORNÝ, V.; AMBROZOVÁ, E. Connatural management approach to preparation and development of individuals in the business environment. Prosopon, 2013, č. 1, s: 93-104. ISSN 1730-0266. ULLRICH, D.; AMBROZOVÁ, E.; KOLEŇÁK, J.; SEIGER, L. Preparation and trainig of people to the profession in challenging conditions in Recent Advances in Telecomunications, Informatics an Educational Technologies, 2014, ISBN 978-1-61804-262-0, KOLEŇÁK, J.; POKORNÝ, V.; AMBROZOVÁ, E. Connatural management jako nový přístup v posilování konkurenceschopnosti lidí na trhu práce. Scientia&Societas. 2013. 9(1). p. 144 - 151. ISSN 1801-7118.

It is worth to realize that social work as a processional activity emerged from the charity that exists probably as long as human societies are organized, what seems to be an argument that theoretical reflection is not a prerequisite for effective help in difficult situations.