Post COVID-19 youth work: A contribution to the Swedish social pedagogical debate

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic affects the whole world. This situation is a very challenging time for all humanity and social services no less. The present article explores how care and different forms of support can or should be offered to young people in the post-COVID-19 youth work. The objective of this paper is to reflect on how social work practitioners can adapt their daily clinical practice by focusing their interventions on the social pedagogical dimensions of social work. The article presents a generalised discussion of practice logics in social work and social pedagogy. Because of the meanings derived from knowledge on the importance of relationships between the helper and the help receiver, social practices in the post-COVID-19 world need to consider social pedagogical expertise in social work practice and the development of preventive assistance for young populations. This effort has been prepared as a part of the project "Social Professionals for Youth Education in the context of European Solidarity"[1].

Keywords: health and society, social work, social pedagogy, young population, pandemic crisis

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Introduction

Pandemic situations such as the virus resulting in COVID-19 is a topic that has received growing attention in the press and other media as a political, social, and individual human catastrophe. In this devastating situation, many social practice disciplines, including social work and social pedagogy, are considering how to adapt their professional practice to both the local and global situation (Webb, 2003). Social professions keep in touch with vulnerable groups, and various social interventions aim to increase the quality of life and health care; easing or solving problems like loneliness, poverty or other social sills (IFSW, 2014).

The diverse population of young people in Sweden and Swedish social practices have been studied intensively but rarely in the context of societal crisis such as pandemics. In order to explore the issue, I will base my attempt mainly on theories of social work and social pedagogy (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 2002; Cedersund et al., 2019; Hämäläinän, 2012; Lorenz, 2008; Schugurensky, 2014). The fundamental elements of theoretical assumptions for welfare fieldwork in this article are dialectical social theory bases including all forms of oppression into social transformative and empowering forms of social work and social pedagogy practice. Another consideration is that familiar patterns in everyday professional life represent actions emanated from communities of practice, collective understandings and the production of experiences, rules and rituals (IFSW, 2014; Wenger, 2000). The notion that interpretations of crisis and problems are changing phenomena defined in terms of ideology, group interests and internationalization is crucial for students of social welfare and social work. Every European country has social welfare, but no two countries have identical welfare systems. The interpretations and solutions of social problems are defined in various ideological and subjective terms and as such socially constructed responses to social problems. The authorities' responses to crisis, such as, for example pandemic create preconditions in social work field practice, what may be understood as situationally created professional selves in the field (Schugurensky, 2014; Wenger, 2000). As the pandemic situation is new and unexpected (Purusottam, 2020; WHO, 2020), the traditional group of social work clients (such as for example people having disabilities or socially disadvantaged due to abuse, mental ill health etc.) is expanding at the same time as resources are declining. Literature on the subject raises

awareness of growing minorities with low socio-economic resources, failed integration, youth migrants on the move and situations with criminal problem behaviour (Björnhagen Thuresson, 2019; Dychawy Rosner, 2019¸ Markowska-Manista and Sawicki, 2019; Manhica, 2016). Despite such developments, with the overloaded professional social work role, little discussion has taken place on how field workers explicitly negotiate their situation to meet contextual demands and need for resources such as social and material capital.

This study uses the term "social professions" (such as, e.g., social workers, social pedagogues, criminologists, curators, caseworkers, etc.) as the notion related to civil servants of broadly similar work in the social sphere providing social work practice in welfare conditions of work practices in a range of European contexts (Abbott, 2014; Jewell, 2007; Lyons, Manion and Carlsen, 2006). This article is a part of a larger European development with an overall aim to improve the existing training programs for social work students to become integrated agents in the youth change process, including Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Swedish universities that deliver training programmes for social professionals (Erasmus + KA 203, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to perspectives influencing young people's life conditions in light of the present pandemic and growing need to identify questions regarding strategic social work in the navigation of disadvantaged young people living in blurry social situations that risk increased vulnerability. The published research on this subject is still rare; however, this paper explores actually reported data such as Swedish governmental reports, connected research literature and news in daily press. I will focus and turn to capture unique aspects of social work and social pedagogy practices in crisis focusing solely on its specific methodology such as its empowering relational elements with relevance to underlying complexity and hidden situational factors affected by the impact of COVID-19 (FAQ, 2020). Although raising important themes, this article constitutes no more than a sample of ongoing inquiries into a specific area of the demand social professions may meet with post-coronavirus caused disadvantages regarding the living conditions for young people. The first section briefly reviews the situational factors that young people encounter where social practices can address treatment and care, social and emotional support. Further, this paper reflects on practice logics. It proposes awareness of relational elements for future understanding of what perspectives social work and social pedagogy may balance in their social interventions.

Situational factors affecting young population

In Sweden, two vulnerable groups of young people have increased rapidly in number during the pandemic time. One group are those suffering from poverty such as homelessness or labour market disadvantages, and the other is the young migrant population (Björkhagen Turesson, 2019; Dychawy Rosner, 2016; Herz and Lalander, 2017). Both groups risk poor education and entering low-skilled and low-paid manual work (Dychawy Rosner, 2019). The lack of resources occurs in several areas of life, such as inadequate home environment, lack of opportunities for appropriate skills development and participation in and influence on their communities and socio-political life.

Social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

There were many earlier pandemics in the larger scope of history such as, e.g., the Black Death, that killed one-third of Europe's population in the middle ages or the Spanish Flu (1918-1920) with an estimated 50 million dead. The new coronavirus pandemic, which hits people's respiratory system affects all continents (FAQ, 2020; Purusottam, 2020; WHO, 2020). The situation in the most developed countries demonstrates shortages in medical supplies and personnel as well as damaging economic and social consequences for people affected by it, such as loss of life and physical and emotional hardship.

The Swedish government's response to this pandemic was subject to the notion that no dictate is needed since the entire population is knowledgeable enough to follow the government's guidelines voluntarily on community quarantine, physical distancing, and limited socialising with others (FAQ, 2020). Consequently, during lockdown, the collective awareness of the need to protect the community and stay at home reduces consumption to the essentials or prioritizes quality of relationships.

On the other hand, issues were raised *à propos* of the growing awareness related to perceived societal injustices, social stigma and social differences in conditional effects as regards poor living conditions as well as overpopulated neighbourhoods. These additional socio-

environmental factors point out increased gang crime and a poor sense of belonging in immigrant populations or minority groups, e.g., people with disabilities, older people, young immigrants coming alone, and also rapidly increasing general unemployment (Dychawy Rosner, 2019; Hammer, 2003; Herz and Lalander, 2017; Knutsson, 2019; WHO, 2020). The segregated areas were also exposed to extensive COVID-19 dead cases.

This situation hurts everyone, but increased youth unemployment makes these groups more prone to psychological suffering of economic dependency, and being unsure of potential future situation in their daily life and on the labour market (Hammer, 2003; Konjunktur institutet, 2016). There has been a recent divergence in social support programs. A rise in structural unemployment with a large increase in numbers of social assistance recipients and social lockdown in pandemic situation create political, economic and administrative pressure. Resource limitations make it difficult for welfare servants to distribute daily practice programmes and to individualize support for vulnerable groups. Consequently, social profession agents of welfare state such as social workers, due to regulations restricting support, encounter at present extensive contradictory goals – to meet people's material needs as well as to move them toward self-efficiency. Not surprisingly, recent reports highlight poor working environment for social professions and risk for being subjected to violence by clients (SVT Aktuellt, 2020).

These stigmatising situations may also divert people from focusing on the real risks of the pandemic. When only a part of a population is seen as being influenced, e.g., older people, others may incorrectly trust that they are safe and by chance compromise their own wellbeing. Important forces that characterise human existence, as social beings are feelings of belonging, power/control over their own situations and facticity. Facticity clarifies human relational sociality when the individual shares a common reality with others by assessing the situation and perceive it as relevant (Flygare, 2018). With these factors in mind, the distinct application of such human sociality is for example young people's participation in underground music festivals or organizing parties or herd activities when coming together. In recent weeks, Sweden has had a positive trend regarding both the number of newly discovered cases, intensive care and deaths. According to Anders Tegnell, the reason why the curve turns up again is still unclear. However, it is young adults aged 20-29 who account for a large part of the increase (SVT, 2020).

Consequently, the pandemic forces speed up the structural change in how young people interact with each other. As the first feeling of panic slows down, the otherwise satisfactory virtual life with chats, Tik-Tok, FaceTime and such is not enough, creating outbursts of in real life herd encounters. Young people's culture of physical meetings creates anxiety as they disregard regulations and rules for social distance; concerns about increased spread of infections are evident when partying young people groups. This create another social space of involvement, fostering networks and request for innovative work tools for social work and social pedagogy professionals (Lang, 2020). Areas in community service lead towards predefined efforts and economic efficiency standardised procedures. The same applies to social interventions and treatment activities (Petersén and Olsson, 2014). It is difficult at present to predict the post-COVID-19 impact on future work tools, the areas for interventions and needs for motivational work regarding young populations. However, it is likely that existing working logics will need evaluation and possibly adaptation to the new conditions.

Relational elements within practice logics in social work and social pedagogy

Social work and social pedagogy practice act as links between the welfare state's general social policy and individual recipients who require help and support (Jewell, 2007; Schugurensky, 2014). People's actions and their experiences of everyday life is influenced by their capabilities, encounters, interactions and social factors. Most important are people's senses of belonging, engagement, and hope. Some researchers understand social pedagogy as a special approach to social work in mobilising local communities and as a part of social work education programmes (Ronnby, 1987). Contemporary critical social work contributes to collective empowerment, social mobilisation, and highlighting societal inequalities from a structural social welfare perspective (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 2002; Briskman and Pease, 2009). On the other hand, social pedagogy in Sweden expresses pedagogical thinking in terms of promoting social adaptation of vulnerable populations in need of social support and strengthening the sense of belonging in the mainstream of society (Hämäläinen, 2012; Cedersund, Eriksson, Ringby Jansson and Svensson, 2019).

It is noted that social pedagogy is strongly connected to being in supportive and empowering relationships with clients (Morgan, 2013; Schugurensky, 2014). What is required for social

relationships to be formed and developed includes elements such as belonging, expectations, and power (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 2002). This context means that considering the social environment and closer relational perspective to the client, social pedagogy within social work practice can be understood as an interactional arena of relationships; as the socio-cultural territory of *procedural and formalised* relationships in welfare services; and partly as *dialectical and socio-therapeutic* relationships alongside the reflective dialogical process of the professional and service user. The nature of the relational forms differs depending on which of the two basic forms is dominating. The relationship work is very much about investigating and determining the client´s need for support, assistance, treatment etc. (Cedersund, et al., 2016; Sandermann and Neumann, 2014).

The procedural dimensions' technical rational relationships acknowledge the impact of universal services and focus on strategic actions, objective facts, efficiency as well as procedural, and reductionist approaches to clients need. These dimensions rest on decisions about what and how something should be done and is subject to legitimate control (Blom and Morén, 2010). The work must be carried out in organised and, therefore, controllable forms concerning support for people who are threatened by various types of exclusion from society. This support can include help in the form of financial assistance, drug prevention or counselling. An additional difficulty is that Swedish social services are needs-based system, desiring to secure a reasonable standard of living and independent life (Jewell, 2007). This system is rule bound standardised grant and it is intended to cover most typical living expenses. Literature shows that trained social workers have struggles, and their decisions making shows rule scarcity among e.g., young migrant population (Björkhagen Thuresson, 2019; Dychawy Rosner, 2016). The dialectical social pedagogic and socio-therapeutic dimensions recognise symbolic co-constructed lifeworld systems, tentative responses, intersubjective meanings in the essence of social situations, breadth of relationships, the complexity of social dimensions, and the importance of expectations along with deep-rooted relations. Relationships seem to refer to some established connection, to which expectations in relationships are often linked to unique individuals. Social pedagogic interaction processes include assumptions about action-motivated driving forces in the individual. Respectfully expressing, when people are given due recognition and importance, they tend to cooperate and are willing participate in collective action. Without empathy and deeply understanding of the clients live situation, it is difficult to give genuine social care. In their actual research, Martinsson and Reimers (2020) illuminate

situations where social workers and teachers as civil servants experience constrains in their work between acting as loyal servants or acting in accordance with their professional ethics and to ensure consistency in the way they provide support.

Despite formal shortcomings in the existing welfare system and work environments, the professional post-COVID 19 relational work need a reinforced set of both formalised and dialectical interventions. If professionals in relationship work do not listen and take into account the perceptions of clients' selves in different situations (see for example Goffman, 1967), presumably many of them may not feel seen and acknowledged in their search for a change. At the same time, the changes that will follow in the footsteps of COVID-19 in welfare and social policy at the macro level will have effects on content, governance and organisation of public activities, as well as conditions for the professional practice of social pedagogy and social work. Worse conditions and increased societal gaps can be expected, with a substantial difference in living conditions, thereby creating new forms of exclusion. Tasks and objectives regarding professional activities may in certain situations end up in conflict or require restrictions and priorities concerning each other.

The dilemmas can be exemplified regarding motivational work, i.e., motivating young people to act for social distancing despite its vague notion. The very important perspective here is e.g., a position balancing loyalty with the employer against the commitment to the client. More, the manoeuvre possibility and how regulations have to be put into practice in meeting the needs of unique clients, e.g., the need for certain efforts that clash with lack of resources or authority role at the same time as a connecting role in motivational conversations with the client. A professional approach requires that the client feels involved in designing the social interventions that concern him or her (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 2002). This requires seriously insertion of relational work and sensitivity in understanding clients' lifeworld. On the other hand, the professional worker has a special authority backed by laws, rules and organisational resources, which creates a strong power asymmetry concerning the client. Therefore, the insight into formalised and dialectical forms of relationship as a basis for building the client's capacity is especially important in order to be able to reach a kind of compromise between efforts and take the work forward.

Reflection and conclusion

This paper seeks to explicate the extent to which recent developments in contextualising of social work/social pedagogy can support imagined counter-practices in the pandemic post-crisis. This article drives two theses on relational elements: the procedural and the dialectical in social work and social pedagogical practices regarding its opportunities and promises for improved wellbeing and welfare.

An inconsistency among polices that promote social service agencies and growing workload for fieldwork and the administrative norm for financial management calls for more recognition of close involvement with the clients, to use socio-pedagogical interventions and invest in prevention (Dychawy Rosner, 2017). In the post-COVID-19 sphere, there are many reasons for social pedagogical work to devote more research capacity to young people with demands for social inclusion and social practices that support navigating their future. There is a need for further investigations into the current severity of the scarcity in welfare system conditions disorder, the role of help and its character needed for positive support process.

The occurrence of dichotomous perspectives in terms of procedural and co-constructed interactions have to be considered concerning a complicated process comprising both individual and structural levels occurring in social pedagogy helping encounters (Morgan, 2013; Schugurensky, 2014). Social pedagogy and social work, taken as a whole, gives us the notion of a speciality with great theoretical pluralism and a high level of pragmatic openness (Cedersund et al., 2019; Hämäläinän, 2012; Sanderman and Neumann, 2014).

Nevertheless, there is a risk of an over-extension of the procedural mode of engagement and the dominance of the sociological perspective. The aim of the dynamics of relationships in social pedagogy practice is to respond to the demands and challenges of the clients' environments (Cameron, 2004; Jones, 2018; Morgan, 2013). The core notion in the axis continuum of *formalised and dialectical relationships* to service user is that professional frameworks will be influenced by the social services structured by institutional dimensions and controlled by rules or political and socio-cultural aspects. This process is an element of

reciprocal influence between homogenisation and specialisation and of a wider process of delivery of social welfare.

The visibility of the dynamics of professional relationships suggests growing desirability in understanding the profound conceptual and operational capacity for action in social pedagogy practices. Certain knowledge is required for acting toward the relational dimensions of social work as an interactional space and as necessary preconditions for the appropriate practice of social pedagogy. For example, *what relation to the other* is necessary in order for procedural or dialectical socio-therapeutic social work and social pedagogy positions to be influenced by culture and socio-political regimes and as such, to be appropriate for the post-COVID-19 clients support?

In conclusion, it may be said that maintenance of the dialectical and person-centred approaches have to be ensured in social work and social pedagogy practices to create an environment and social conditions in which young people can be supported. Future socio-pedagogical interventions require the development of integral perspectives while focusing on problem-solving built on the notion that reality is a dynamic system continuously evolving and changing.

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