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Family matters are not just domestic affairs: a perspective on social pedagogy in social work

Abstract:

In the last few decades, the traditional concept of family has weakened while the development of numerous new constellations has gained a lot of attention. Convention sees family as a nuclear social formation, where heterosexual parents raise their children well. This view attests to the potential for healthy functioning in a variety of family arrangements, and to the stability of these social environments. In the turmoil of our rapidly changing world, the value of system orientation is changing and questions are being raised over what is an ordinary landscape of family life, its constellations and optimal functioning. This article raises family-relevant issues and discusses social pedagogy in family social work, particularly related to social care in Sweden intended for socially vulnerable populations such as the elderly, members of minority ethnic groups, and persons with disabilities suffering from discrimination and social exclusion. It is concluded that – in these populations – the family constellation, be it traditional or modern, is not really the issue, since public social care service constructions have mostly replaced traditional caring relations within families with leveling institutional structures. The social pedagogy in family social work professional practice is conducted using socio-ecological approaches for assessment, treatment and service delivery, for the improvement of individual wellbeing referred to as the individual, social and sociopolitical life-world context.

Key words: family, social pedagogy, social work, Sweden

Introduction

Contemporary research recognises many factors that impact family as a social construction: established patterns of stereotypes and the portrayal of social groups, a family's origin and friends, norms of interaction between various family members, and direct exposure to one another. It is noted that family shapes are constantly changing and come in a variety of forms relating to demographic trends, social policies, immigration patterns and cultural rules

(Dominelli, 2004). From this perspective, a single definition does not exist. Social workers acknowledge that every family case presents limits and resources related to their living conditions that requires situational knowledge, which also has to be connected to a broader society and social care system (Guidi, Meeuwisse and Sacaramuzzino, 2015). Furthermore, when situated in the diverse public institutional domain of the welfare state, a family construct operates within different family systems, influenced mostly by different logic (e.g., family care, child care or elderly home care).

Until recently, the recognised family form was a heterosexual married couple in which the man was the economic provider and the woman the carer. This mainstream conceptualisation simultaneously normalises a particular way of viewing family and dismisses other structures as pathological. That may, for example, include extended cross generational family patterns, individuals living alone, or parents of the same gender – all of whom, by this, may be categorised as deviant (Peterson, 2013). These impacting factors may expose people to major problems, lead to disadvantages in social equality, and cause oppression, powerlessness and the need for support from the social agencies and social care services in a welfare regime.

The focus of this paper originates from a presumption that social work interventions serves as a partial replacement of family care structures in relation to current social policy and professional schemes. The aim of this article is to shed light on the complexity of social pedagogy in family social work, and to reflect on the existing patterns of family constructs as social formations. The question is, to what extent the professional models of practice focus on person-centered approaches, and how the specific needs of the individual are shaped in the model's problem approach and understanding. I will reflect on the meaning of family matters, examining its relationship to social pedagogy within social work practice. The basis for the portrayals in the paper are sourced from contemporary research in services for people at risk of exclusion and social vulnerability, analysing inquiries associated to managerial approaches in the Swedish context of certain families. The literature offers various theoretical perspectives on social service organisation, professionalization and service delivery. In the present article, however, the sphere between welfare systems and life-world domains forms the theoretical starting point for framing social pedagogy in family social work (Coleman, 1986; Habermas, 1987).

Swedish social pedagogy intertwines with professional social work practice by way of integrated educational programs, and as a field of professional activity, through being the agents of society who offer social interventions at the individual, group and communities

level (Righard and Montesino, 2012). Hence, professional social workers are recognised as representing both central and local authorities, protecting the welfare of not only the individual but also the wider community. The 'social' in social pedagogy refers to socialisation into values and beliefs (Kyriacou et al., 2009), focus on specific beliefs for social integration (Hallstedt and Högström, 2005), and social protection to emphasise equal opportunities (Stephens, 2009). In this sense, there is no duality between social work and social pedagogy (Göppner and Hämäläinen, 2007). The terms social work and social pedagogy are used interchangeably through this paper, and refer to socio-pedagogical social work related to living conditions with the aim of protecting vulnerable populations with respect to class, education, status and wealth (Ericsson, 2013; Mullay, 1997).

This article consists of two parts, providing an overview of the contextual landscape and socio-ecological models of practice in social pedagogy in family social work. In the first part, the contextual factors are explored, and the second part provides a general overview of the operationalised concepts and empirical examples of various family-related practices.

Contextual landscape of family socio-pedagogical social work

Developing social welfare in so-called welfare states and societies is considered to be a way of creating societal togetherness and, for example in Sweden, it is strongly connected to decreasing the social vulnerability of individuals, by sheltering their existence and by building service systems including social care, so that they, and society, may grow and flourish. Social welfare benefits regimes, such as various social services and agencies in social care (e.g., elderly care or services for people with disabilities, residential care homes and child protection institutions), embrace helping professions as the implementers of social policies in diverse social programs for populations at risk.

According to Midgley (1997), social welfare has to include dimensions of the management of social problems, meet people's needs, and enhance opportunities at the individual, group and societal level. The Nordic welfare system is often considered a reference point for many countries in the world, with its emphasis on good living conditions, universal health and social care. And yet, although Scandinavian countries underline a concept of "social welfare citizenship", citizens' self-responsibility and participation regarding welfare schemes is subject to paternalistic differentiation in the system's tendency to divide and access people to identify those "in need of service" and "no need of service". These key elements of social inclusion to welfare-based standards of living are, in surveys,

explained sometimes by the urge to limit the high costs linked to generous welfare schemes (OECD, 2005).

The prevailing notion views the state and the public sector as synonymous. Researchers have directed their attention to the caring character of the state (Christiansen and Petersen, 2001), while municipalities (kommuner) at local government level are often seen as a sort of mediator between the state and the rest of society (Kröger, 1997). Although some variations occur, studies present social policies as very coherent and uniform in their intentions. Within the mainstream study of welfare, though, the same services can be rated as ineffective in terms of redistribution and extremely progressive in terms of quality of life. Scandinavian feminist discussion has questioned the male-dominated welfare state debate, accusing it of a disregard for social care services and ignorance of the gender issue (Kröger, 1997). In recent decades, Sweden has shown a considerable increase in the numbers of two-income families. Around 70% of women are part of the workforce. The Swedish labour market operates in gender neutral terms, promoting women's autonomy and independence, leading to an expansion of public child care. In everyday life however, gender specific boundaries often prevail; although, on the other hand, the norm-critical gender perspective and ideology of equality promote fathers' involvement in child care and domestic chores (Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Plantin, 2007). Traditionally, families have always played a major role in caregiving for those with long-term illnesses. For example, Boonsastean et al., (2015) found that there is an important family role in encouraging women with diabetes to manage their life situations. In Swedish social policy and social care services, the important role of related care providers has recently been rediscovered. This significant perspective is expressed by the authorities in supporting relatives who provide familial care to family members with a psychiatric condition, a disabled child, or older parents (Socialdepartamentet, 2008).

Globalisation and the changing labour market impact the boundary between work and family, and people experience an intensification of their workloads as well as decreasing work stability and employment security (Bergh, 2011). At the same time, it is recognised that welfare policies are concerned with the full employment of citizens in order to fulfil the vision of social security and equality. As a consequence, the structural typology of the welfare regime in Sweden is allocated between the state, the market and the family (Jegermalm and Sundström, 2015). It applies the extensive promotion of individual autonomy and public social care services, as well as putting demands on the individual's availability to the labour market and indicating simultaneously existing mutual rights and obligations.

Contemporary theorists have highlighted views of the family as a societally created construct, influenced by cultural and societal values, along with the growing complexity and diversity of family arrangements (Dominelli, 2004; Jegermalm and Sundsrtöm, 2015; Johansson and Klinth, 2008). From an ecosystemic perspective such as that stated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), each family's capabilities, needs and coping styles are considered in relation to the larger social systems in which they are embedded. In this sense, family as an important social unit has received increasing attention in literature and from practitioners. Likewise, the concept of social pedagogy in social work is seeing increased interest, as it considers people's lifeworlds and their lived experiences (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009), and prevents work with social problems related to process of exclusion (Hallstedt and Högström, 2005), avoiding the negative effects these can have on people's living conditions. Social pedagogy practice in social work toward the family can be applied in a variety of circumstances, such as conditions of poverty, violence, poor school performance and addiction, to name a few. The interventions can be made at individual or community level.

The fundamental complexity of social vulnerability is the significance of the difficulties that need to be addressed in human wellbeing, such as the problem of the inequality of living conditions and the risk of marginalisation. Social construction theory, with its roots in interpretative social sciences, has a powerful impact on the present ideological shift in family social work (Blumer, 1969). It is concerned with illuminating the processes by which people perceive, interchange or relate to the world in which they live (Goffman, 1958; Lewin and Levin, 1987). Research shows that social work and social pedagogy practice both tackle the nature of social problems, in that they are an inherent part of the existing society and its social order (Hallstedt, Högström and Nilsson, 2013; Stephens, 2009; Thompson, 2015). Additionally, according to Thompson (2015), social work practice is driven by a theoretical perspective, and from fieldwork experience.

In summary, focusing on these issues recognises the prevailing infrastructure around a person or a family unit. This holistic way of working called for a rethink from social workers, urging them to have a wider outlook in the conceptual base for their work and to accept approaches that may be understood as socio-ecological models of practice.

Socio-ecological models of social pedagogy in social work practice

The concept of social pedagogy in social work includes the processes of social justice and equity, and empowerment and emancipation, which lie at the core of an individual's

experience with the incorporated collective experience. Certainly, a process of exclusion may be seen as a set of objective circumstances, but it also includes a subjective interpretation of existing life conditions, ideology, the present social order or social policy. In examining the understanding of social pedagogy within social fields of practice, Eriksson (2014) found two discourses: the universalistic and the particularistic, which were constructed extending from an individualistic adoptive starting point through a democratic and mobilising collective work meaning. These underlying and overlapping components follow the central ideas of progressive socio-pedagogical social work that may be comprehended in relation to system theoretical understandings at the micro-, meso- and macro-level (Coleman, 1986). This school of thought engages with the micro aspects of daily life but also with the macro elements of the social characteristics of the society, its roles and institutional norms (Huston and Mullan-Jensen, 2011). It is a serious challenge because vital aspects of the implementation may involve different micro-, meso- and macro-levels, which do not always respond in harmony to an individual's needs. Theoretically, the existing pragmatism is related to conventional, interactive and contemporary progressive critical social work.

Elements of the conventional family approach at the micro-level

Some crucial ideas on micro family matters regard the social situation of individuals (Coleman, 1986). At the client level of practice, it is recognised as important for social work practitioners to maintain space in approaching peoples' experiences of hardship of everyday life problems. Formative personal experiences such as, for example, trauma, illness or loss, play a significant role in an individual's unique journey throughout the life course. The traditional models of approaching practice represent diverse fieldwork with reconstruction or restoration of the status to its former condition. There are also areas of disagreement. Social pedagogy in family social work practice within a neo-conservative paradigm attributes problems to an individual's family dysfunction as a pathological social unit. Thus, the major tactics in working with families within this micro-system level may be controlling this pathology, for example by removing children from the family, or using tools such as asylums and prisons.

The micro-level of practice also reflects Goffman's (1959) emphasis on the interaction order, where face-to-face encounters take place within a specific scene of social location. Several researchers have highlighted the importance of the interpretative aspect of the social in social pedagogy practice and noted its impact as being difficult to fully explain in tangible

interactional social situations. Kyriacou et al., (2009), found its core shapes in the interaction process of socialisation into values, and beliefs that embrace aspects of personal and social development. Focusing in on social interactions, it is indicated that they have significant importance when, for example, working with diverse issues of integration.

The recent wave of immigration comprises refugees and relatives of immigrants living in Sweden. An analysis conducted by Dychawy Rosner (2016) identified that cultural and identity-related issues needed to be developed proactively in supported transitions to independence, such as, for example, socio-pedagogical work around the development of integrated living contexts and inclusion programs with immigrants. With this socialisation outlook in place, Hammarén, Lunneblad and Johansson (2014), investigated social work practices on men at risk of either harming themselves or others, gender inequalities, and men's violence against women. Drawing on a norm-critical approach, they found that young men problems were individualised, and they were depicted as lost or confused. The study showed how the practice was inclined towards traditional images of gender and the common assumption that young men are a problem and risk in society. Only a minority of the investigated projects aspired to challenge gender stereotyping norms or thinking and criticise polarised gender positions.

Notably, presenting a critical analysis of social systems and conventional social work practice as a response to social problems, Mullay (1997) offers the structural descriptive nature of social problems as they are an inherent part of existing community norms and social order. The perception of problems as tied to the individual opens up other directions of thinking in theory and practice based on intersubjective notions of social systems. Thus, it is claimed, community development traditions in social work and social pedagogy apply to both traditional and more radical approach bases in their interventions. Mobilisation dimensions consider help to emancipate those on the margins of society from oppression as, in practice, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1996). It focuses on an individual's frame of action in partnership with the social environment. The identified constraints and impacting weaknesses at the micro- system stance are explored by this theory, which attracted more attention when enhanced by issues of different social spheres.

Elements of the interactive family approach at the meso-level

The meso-level focuses on intermediate arrangements such as families and social networks (Coleman, 1986). The family perspective captured in the meso-level represents the notion that

people experience their lives while interacting with the people around them. One life event of a family member can therefore impact other family members, or people interacting in their social networks.

Descriptive social work within this system level assumes an inclusive practice and its attempts towards a dialectical practical intent concerning all forms of oppressive relations at the personal, group or political level. Its outlines social transformation dynamics and emancipatory forms of social work as a sort of mediator between the individual and institutional systems. In contrast with neo-conservatism, descriptively progressive social pedagogy family social work – as the dominant societal Swedish paradigm – provides opportunities that to a great extent shape society as a pluralism (manifold) of individual structures, rather than as a class or stratified society. People are equal in face of the law and have access to education, the job market, health care, social services and so on. This view of the representation of existing pluralism may be adopted and basically carried through the two models of socio-pedagogical social work practice, both reactive approach models and the re-socialisation approach, which are both based mainly on the more holistic socio-ecological model of practice. Reactive family practice focuses on the effects of social problems rather than on its causes. Social work and social pedagogy practice try to make some changes in people's immediate environments, and influence existing societal structures. According to Dominelli (2004), rather than attributing problems at the family level – to, e.g., poor parenting or maladaptive communication, or dysfunctional families where social problems become family problems – the focus should be directed toward the social problems and their impact on the micro- and meso-levels of social structures in shaping relationships.

The meso-level dimensions can be exemplified by working with the mechanisms of re-socialisation as another way of helping families who are negatively affected by social exclusion and disadvantage. These models of practice may obtain service programmes by way of compensation, focusing on the causes of problems and promoting well-being through, for example, job protection, housing programs for the homeless, immigrants etc. Another study, conducted by Guidi et al., (2015) which investigated how Italian and Nordic welfare models influence social workers' assessments of children at risk, found different response tendencies among Italian and Swedish social practitioners. The different approach and work processes were influenced by institutional factors and the organisation of the child welfare delivery system at the local level. The Swedish style of assessment and intervention was conducted more formally, strongly influenced by the organisation of the service and the law.

Elements of the progressive family approach at the macro-level

The occurrence of multi-layer family realities challenges practitioners to apply a more comprehensive framework (with respect to holistic social work directed by changes) on the structures of society, instead of the personal characteristics of individuals or groups victimised by social problems (Mullaly, 1997). As Thompson (2015) points out, social work is part of a problem-solving perspective on society; existing social problems thus operate at the intersection of personal situations and broader social forces. A progressive structural approach at the macro-level suggests the focus for change occurs mainly on the arrangements of society and not solely based on the individual. It appears to be flexible and inclusive, and is concerned with all groups who are victims of the present social order – the practical relevance is in making connections between the individual and the political. Progressive social pedagogy in the family social work approach offers to utilise the social theory of domain and an interpretative perspective on the social world (Göppner and Hämäläinen, 2007).

The presence of multilayered encounters between formal organisational logics and clients' life-worlds have been investigated many times. This can be exemplified by a study conducted by Dychawy Rosner, which applied a combined focus on both the medical (Dychawy Rosner and Eklund, 2003) and social (Dychawy Rosner, 2015) origins of models in its inquiries into social work practice with people that have intellectual disabilities. Bringing together these perspectives allowed a movement from traditional treatment approaches, focusing on the pathology of an individual, to the role of social structures and their impact on personal lifeworlds and perceived lived constraints. This effort implies that the concept of measuring functional disability and documenting chronic conditions could be pooled into community intervention. The conducted participatory action research (PAR), involving the individual, family and community levels, decreased social inequality and isolation (Dychawy Rosner, 2015). The participation and active partnership of service receivers in the development of services empowered these socially disadvantaged persons and reduced the discrepancies of power between care takers and care receivers. The participants had an enhanced sense of belonging and increased access to facilities such as mainstream recreation arenas and work placements. This opening for service receivers and local community authorities to both be involved has been a significant component of the contextual approach. Likewise, Herz (2016) examined 13 social projects conducted by civil society organisations as a complement to the municipal welfare sector in subsidised child care. The study revealed a lack of long-term service alternatives, a lack of a holistic approach in terms of policies, and a

lack of capability to take more responsibility for the well-being of clients. Correspondingly, diverse social domains can be illuminated, shedding light on the personal aspects of a client's lived experience.

This recent development, related to the process of linking the perceiver with what is perceived, brings the theory of social domains and layered social world to the social work process (Huston and Mullan-Jensen, 2011; Mullay, 1997). In order to understand this ongoing development, these new ways of inquiring into practice can be seen as examples supporting an ongoing redefinition of the macro-structures of the welfare state as it is shaped locally at the municipal welfare system level.

Conclusion

Family matters are recognised as a multidimensional construct containing bidirectional interactions. They are a complex phenomenon that originates in people's relationship with each other and with society. The implications for social pedagogy within family social work can be understood as a process of coping with the demands of peoples' disadvantages and, correspondingly, a process of establishing better relations to the society and social systems in which they belong.

To address the situation of socio-pedagogical social work, a comprehensive understanding of the whole dimension of the society and family interface is necessary. Nevertheless, it is worth bringing attention to the fact that the changing scenes of 'the family' is not at problem to be solved, but rather a feature, constituted of complex territory, for social pedagogy in family social work to occupy. Indeed, social pedagogy related to this could not be resolved by a rule book or manual procedures followed slavishly. However, a potential opportunity may develop through an increased awareness of the response in a social environment to clients' life conditions, their families, and diverse roles of advocacy network. Thus, social pedagogy within social work is assumed as a way of addressing the question of social justice and welfare among underprivileged individuals and families, and engaging societal implementations to address the social issues affecting them. The professional task is to consider what is going on inside the system, e.g., the family or the helping institution. This approach assumes an expert position on behalf of the professional worker. In addition, it is worth pointing out that social work practices operate within dual logics, having an impact on welfare legislation and related political decisions, and being impacted by the same. The tradition of using professional expertise may include hidden conflicts of duties in relation to

the family due to professional responsibilities for both the care and control of the family members (Johansson et al., 2008). These issues may also be connected to factors including concern for the child and the welfare institution that do not correspond, e.g., a responsibility to control public spending. In terms of the legitimacy mandate and power, however, the process of professional conduct has to be strong, involving conscious responsibility and critical reflective practice. However, social workers have to adopt a combined focus on attempts to deal with the development towards the conceptual interchange between micro-, meso- and macro-systems, in order to intervene in cooperation with the family orders, the institutional logics and the occurred structures of power.

The contents of this article carry evident facts but also reflect limitations, as the study did not systematically access all published studies of family matters. In spite of these shortcomings, the study draws attention to the constructs of family as a societal process of importance for social workers preparing diverse social pedagogy in family social work interventions. Contemporary progressive critical family social work aspires to be a comprehensive understanding of the complexity and specificity of family themes, avoiding the fragmentation of the field. The proposed dimensions can aid practitioners in the conceptualisation and treatment of family-related challenges, particularly in cases where the relations of close family members have to be replaced by institutional functions.

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