

**SOCIAL WORK: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRAXIS****Wladyslaw Majkowski**

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**Abstract.** The need for social work arises in the context of the emergence of social and personal problems. Performing this role, like any other professional job, requires the employee to have appropriate knowledge, skills and competences. Moreover, this type of work assumes that a social worker has certain characterological traits. They are: empathy, easy contact with others, respect for other people and selflessness. Only having such character traits, a social worker can effectively fulfill his role.

**Keywords:** Social problems, social work, social worker, social contract, human person.

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**Introduction**

There are few scientific disciplines in which their theoretical and practical dimensions are as close to each other as it is in social work as a doctrine and social work as a form of commitment to improve the living conditions of an individual or a group. In this case, one can even talk about their mutual conditioning. Positivists with August Comte and Emil Durheim at the head would probably exclude such a marriage by referring to the concept of science for science. Although the very idea of science (in particular sociology) uninvolved seemed to be right, its sterility is already questionable. If not the student studying social problems uses his knowledge to apply it, then someone else may do it. Probably this approach to science was influenced by Marxist theory, which in science perceived the tool in class struggle. Every science in a Marxist perspective is “committed” by its very nature; it serves as a tool in struggle for a new social order - communism.

The basic difference that occurs between the perspective of social work as knowledge and its application in solving social problems and the Marxist perspective is that while the former has in view a man, an individual in need, the engaged knowledge according to Marx, is to be at the service of the social class - proletariat. Secondly, given the necessary direction of social change, commitment to the working class is the only “right” form of commitment. This working class, at least temporarily, before a classless society is created, is a beneficiary of this commitment. Finally, the method of social work as a form of social involvement is, by all means, a “peaceful” action, without violence, in comparison with the Marxist perspective, where violence - revolution is an instrument of reaching a goal.

Finally, and this should be strongly emphasized, social work as a commitment to the needy has its own reference to human needs, which in specific situations are not satisfied. This lack is to be completed by a social worker as part of his role. In this way, a social worker is a

researcher, a diagnostician, but also a pedagogue, educator and spokesperson of those, who are in need (*Kowalski, 2008:20*).

## 1. Theoretical Dimension of Social Work

Social work in the theoretical dimension refers to the identification of social problems of a given society, a concrete community or a category of people, and understanding of their determinants. On the one hand, it is a study of the structures and dynamics of a specific unit of social life in the aspect of the dysfunctions that appear in it, but also the conditions of these dysfunctions of a given category of people. Therefore “when sociologists look at social problems, they make certain basic assumptions about why things happen as they do. These assumptions, or premises, give them a starting point for studying even some very complicated problems” (*Julian, 1993:4*).

The definition of social work in the theoretical dimension requires the description of its work, subject, method and purpose. The first of these elements - the subject contains the cognitive element, that is, the definition of social dysfunctions, defining the role of social workers and relations between clients of social work and social workers. The method of social work concerns “research procedures used by theoreticians of professional help”, and “the goal of social work theory is to get to know” (*Czarnecki, 2012:425*) reality that is of interest. This means that “the theory of social work primarily develops a specific conceptual apparatus by means of which social workers can capture specific problems” (*Czarnecki, 2012:425*). The first stage of these procedures is to identify the individual's needs, and then to work out ways of satisfying them as part of the help activities. It is about formulating generalizations covering specific categories of events, which in turn will allow forming forecasts for the future.

### 1.1. Social Problems

A social problem is understood as a state of affairs that is in conflict with generally accepted norms and values in a given society. The sources of this state of affairs can be both intentional and non-intentional actions of entities, and even an ordinary case. This means that the source of social problems can be extremely different forms of action, but they can also be born in the context of acceptable behaviors or actions aimed at achieving a positive goal. In addition, different categories of people experience problems differently, which usually leads to a different way of understanding them. Consequently, the attitude of individuals towards social problems is diverse, because it always grows in the context of the social environment in which it operates and the previous experiences gained. This is why these conditions lead to different proposals for solving them, and even the lack of their solutions due to the fact, that they benefit from this state of affairs. “Many landlords, for example, benefit from housing shortages among the poor and even middle classes, because the existence of such a shortage allows them to impose high rents with providing adequate (and costly) service“ (*Julian, 1993:9*).

Therefore, two main conditions must be met in order for a state of affairs to become a social problem. The first is the existence of an objective conditions; the second – “a significant number of people – or a number of significant people – must agree both that this condition violates an accepted value or standard and that it should be eliminated, resolved, or remedied” (*Julian, 1993:9*).

## 1.2. An Analysis of Social Problems

The objective state of affairs, which are social problems, is perceived differently depending on the category of people who experience them, and depending on the different perspectives in which they are seen, analyzed and understood. The first dependence has already been mentioned above; the second grows in the context of different points of view: biological, psychological or sociological. The former perceives certain forms of behavior because of biological conditioning in the context of inheritance, for example, a tendency to alcohol or criminal behavior. Such theory was developed by Cesare Lombroso, and currently functions under the name of „born criminals”. Although the theory itself is a far-reaching simplification, it has never been completely abandoned. The psychological perspective takes into account the mental and emotional processes that are the experience of individuals. These processes determine the reference of individuals to social factors, which in turn sheds light on their individual reactions to these factors. For example, a specific type of relationship with parents may condition subsequent homosexual behavior that goes beyond the level of psychological behavior. The sociological approach to social problems is a study of social behavior under the account of their dysfunctional character. For example, the student might try to answer the question of why there is hunger in some communities, although the community is technically able to solve this problem.

## 2. Social Problems in the Context of Cultural Values

Social problems arising in the context of existential needs - whose satisfaction determines survival: food, housing, clothing ... do not imply political or ideological conditions. They are universal and what may differ is the form of their satisfaction. On the other hand, some other problems, and consequently also social work itself as a practical activity aimed at solving them, always has its reference to cultural values. In this dimension, its relationship with philosophy (ethics, anthropology) and politics is visible. This means firstly that there is no “one” social work and that social work experiences their limitations by using knowledge from other sciences.

In Christian-European culture, social work is based on three fundamental values: human person's dignity, human rights and social solidarity.

### 2.1. Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the human person belongs to the basic elements of Judeo-Christian and European culture. In addition, although the very concept of a person some different meanings, then with this concept “we always associate a special value, unique and appropriate only to this concept. To call someone a person, means to acknowledge his ennobling dissimilarity from the non-personal world, and at the same time to attribute to him some element of absoluteness and infinity” (*Bardel, Gadacz, 2004:794*). This ennobling dignity of a person distinguishes her from all other beings. A person is a value for itself and an end in itself. The personal norm associated with a person unambiguously separates a person from a thing. In particular, a person has no price and nothing can replace it. The person is free, intelligent, autonomous and has the ability to self-reflect in various aspects of his being a person. Thus, “when we talk about a human person's dignity, it is not only its superiority in comparison with other creatures; it's all about what, or rather, what man is in him. Who a man is in himself is connected above all with his interior. All externalizations: activities, production, work, creations - they have there their origin and their cause” (*Wojtyła, 1996:418*).

The characteristic of a person of great importance is its dialogic, interactive, social character. The person functions, fulfils and reveals herself in relationships with others, creating a community of people, similar beings. "Person is due to his total reference to other people and to whole reality, including God. Only then is her own identity obtained. Therefore, a person assumes the necessary common being, fulfills it and makes it unequalled" (*Bartnik, 2009:230*).

## 2.2. Human Rights

The source of human rights is his dignity, the source of which is being a person. Such laws have always had a human right, but they have not always been sufficiently made aware of by man. Only the conscious human dignity leads to the declaration of his rights because of being human. "It can be said, therefore, that the awareness of the unique value of the human persons conduces to the awareness of its entitlements" (*Skorowski, 2004:960*).

Various concepts of human rights perceive different sources of the normative basis of human rights. The relative concept perceives the justification of human rights established by a particular authority. A good example of this is the so-called civic rights that owe both their existence and the legislative content of the state function. This means that the legislator can repeal or change them in part or in whole.

Catholic social doctrine sees the justification of human rights in the dignity of the human person. Since this dignity is an attribute of the human person, they are not dependent on constituted law; they are not subject to change or restrictions because their source is not located within the framework of human legislation. They belong to man because of being human, and man acquires them at the moment of conception. It is the dignity of a human being that is their source, and consequently they are not acquired, but innate. This concept is described as an absolute concept of human rights. That is why "building a catalog covering basic human rights depends not so much on the feelings of people, but rather on objective law, grounded in human nature" (*Piwowarski, 1993:71*).

The rights arising from the dignity of the human person (libertarian, social and solidarity) are characterized by the fact that they constitute an unbreakable unity. Violation of one category of law results in violation of others. "Integrity understood in this way, like absoluteness, is in close relation to the dignity of the person: the rights of the person on the one hand result from dignity, on the other - they guard and protect this dignity" (*Skorowski, 2004:964*).

## 2.3. Social Solidarity

Social solidarity grows in the context of the relationship between the human person and the common good. Both reference directions are at stake: from the human person and its dignity to the community (the common good) and vice versa from the community (common good) to the good of the human person. The principle of solidarity can therefore be defined as "the overall concern for safeguarding both the dignity of the human person and his rights, as well as the common good and the rights of the community" (*Piwowarski, 1983:95*). The principle of solidarity deriving from the dignity of the human person and the social dimension of human nature expresses their mutual connection. It is not just a loose relation of reference to these two elements, but rather a far-reaching interdependence. Thus, "on the one hand, this principle has its basis in the previously ontic existence of mutual connection between oneself and society, and on the other, means the moral responsibility (social responsibility) resulting from this ontic content" (*Höffner, 1999:46*).

Due to his social nature, man is “targeted” to radical solidarity with another human being, the basic element of which is to feel responsible for him. This one cannot remain in the sphere of ideas; it must take a concrete form. It is a kind of participation in the humanity of others (*Wojtyła, 1996:331*). This type of reference lies at the foundation of a specific being with others. Therefore, “the ability to participate in the very humanity of every human being, including a socially excluded person, is the foundation of the ethos of the work of a social worker, family assistant or steetworker” (*Jęczmień, 2017:33*).

In the Catholic perspective, as the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes* stresses, solidarity, although necessary, is not perfect. It must be increased and expanded to become a family solidarity character, and even the characteristics of the one that will be attended by those who are saved (GetS, 32). Hence, as Pope John Paul II observes in his encyclic *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, solidarity “seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimensions, total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation” (SRS, 40).

### 3. Praxis of Social Work

In the historical perspective, social work was associated with religious institutions. Religious leaders referred to such problems as alcoholism, marital infidelity, murders, robberies ... treating them as a lack of observance of religious norms. In this context, the solution to the problem was seen in the spiritual refinement of individuals. Although this type of understanding and treatment of social problems brought some results, too much emphasis on the sinfulness of man as the source of the problem has undermined the role of social factors. The circle of people who dealt with social problems “professionally” was also narrowed. Hence, only in a modern society has the circle of people representing various professions expanded who were involved in eliminating social problems. There were among them: writers, lawyers, journalists ...

At present, a social worker has the adequate knowledge, or a set of information about his or her professional work, that is, procedures used in professional assistance (theoretical dimension of professional work). It allows him to professionally focus his actions on the needs of individuals or groups (practical dimension of professional work). Hence, social work is understood as “professional activity aimed at helping individuals and families to strengthen or regain the ability to function in society by performing appropriate social roles and creating conditions conducive to this goal” (*Ustawa, 2004:593*). The social work defined in this way includes a wide range of activities and what is needed in it requires a social worker to have multiple competencies depending on the specific problems with which he or she collides. Therefore, the social worker's activity must be preceded by a thorough study and accurate diagnosis of the situation of the beneficiary of social work and its immediate environment. In particular, the types and scope of interaction with the nearest environment should be analyzed. However, what constitutes the starting point for a social worker is “recognition of the primacy of the human person before the community. Becoming aware of the inviolability of the dignity of every human person is an essential condition for building human communities. Any challenge to engage in social life must be based on the recognition of the truth that a person is a value in itself; it can not be used, reduced to the role of a tool or a thing” (*Nagórny, 1997:121*).

#### 3.1. Eliminating and Mitigating the Causes of Social and Personal Problems

The scope of social work is very wide and diverse because the problems that cause it are manifold. The criterion for the diversity of the community in this matter is the degree of socio-economic development. While in societies that are underdeveloped, social work is at a very low

level, and the role of a social worker is played by charitable organizations, then in developed societies, far-reaching institutionalization of social work takes place.

It should be added that social problems in non-developed societies are different, from those in developed societies. In the first there is a low standard of living, within which even many basic human needs are not satisfied or are minimally satisfied. In the developed societies - problems are born on the basis of the abuse of freedom, abundance of wealth, weak family ties, anomie in Durkheimian meaning, alienation ... This means that while in socially undeveloped societies, social problems more often have their source in the failure of the socio-economic system, in developed societies, social problems occur at the level of maladjustment of individuals and groups. Rapid socio-economic changes, the anonymity of urban life, the lack of informal social control ... are circumstances that favor the emergence of attitudes and deviant behavior. In social work one should take into account two basic aspects: the first is the presence of specific problems, deviations; second, an identification of the reasons for this state of affairs. The first range of problems concerns the existing state of affairs - individual and group problems; second - conditioning of the existing deviations. The first concerns the symptoms of existing dysfunctions and pathologies, the second - their causes. Relief of dysfunction symptoms is usually the first form of social worker's activity. This is usually the first form of help. Removing the causes of problems is the right task for social work. Sometimes, however, this must take place as part of wider actions - the social policy of the state.

### 3.2. Social Worker as a Subject of Social Activities

The social worker of modern society is a part of the state structure, created for the implementation of a specific social policy. This policy, as it was already emphasized above, serves to prevent the emergence of social problems, and when they appear nonetheless, to solve them. These types of actions are not single actions, but rather an integrated system of activities that can only be effective in this shape. An expression of such a systemic action is the fact of working in a group of social workers. In this way, the knowledge and experience of individual employees is more effectively used, and if necessary, it is possible to use the knowledge of other professionals. At the same time, the danger that the client will receive signals of conflicting expectations will be avoided (*Luczyńska, 2013:9*).

This systemic approach to the problem in social work requires some formalization of the social worker - client relationship that gives this formality a dimension of durability. This is called social contract. It contains an analysis of the client's situation, which is to set the directions of actions with the maximum use of the identified customer's resources, is a precise record of the social worker's obligations and the beneficiary of the assistance provided. "The social contract is one of the instruments of social work, indicating to the person or the family the directions of actions enabling to get out of a difficult situation, mobilizing to own activity: it strengthens faith in one's own ability, provides the opportunity to use the needed consultations or financial assistance, and determines the way of support of the client's activities by a social worker" (*Szot, 2017:49-50*).

### 3.3. Personnel Abilities of a Social Worker

If it is true that every professional job implies preparation for performing specific roles related to it, social work also assumes certain personality traits of a social worker. The point is that his work is not only closely related to other people, but a very specific category. These are people who, for one reason or another, need help. Hence the need for a social worker to have, apart from knowledge, skills and competences, specific personality traits. The most important

of them are: the ease of establishing contact with others, empathy, respect for the dignity of another person, selflessness.

Ease of contact; although usually a man lives in a social environment, starting from the family and ending with society, which is inherently betting his interactions with others, then not every type of personality presents similar possibilities in this respect. Not every type of work requires similar skills to establish relationships with other people. Two types of personality make it difficult or even impossible to properly perform the role of a social worker: the type of a shy person and an authoritarian man. In the first case, the employee's action will be marked by the lack of a proper initiative on his part; in the second - the imposition of an interaction difficult to accept by the client.

Empathy; this feature of a social worker seems to be the most important in his work. This is about emotional empathy - the ability to empathize with the client's situation, as well as cognitive empathy - a look at the situation from the perspective of the beneficiary of the provided assistance. This is due to the fact that the customer is a person or group who needs help. Lack of empathy in such situation, even if the employee undertakes assistance activities, boils down to technical procedures in which the needy person is treated as an object, mentally distant to a social worker. Therefore, even if the technical problem has been solved, the customer remains not fully satisfied or even experiences a sense of humiliation. The latter situation would be a denial of what the social worker was going to get.

Respect for the dignity of the client; as it has been noticed, the above-mentioned aid action has its deepest justification in the dignity of the human person, although for some reason she found herself in trouble. Moreover, it must be added that the client, to whom the help is directed, is extremely sensitive to his dignity. First, help itself addressed to him already carries the element of humiliation putting him in the situation of the recipient. If it were accompanied by an attitude of disrespect from a social worker, the effect of such action would be miserable or even counterproductive. The attitude of respect for a social welfare client can be problematic especially when his situation is at fault. In this case, the motivation of a religious employee is the most functional. The client is a person, a neighbor who is in need, although when he has provoked it himself. Disinterestedness is a very useful feature of a social worker because she is largely responsible for the attitude towards the client. It is always present in the situation of voluntary service. A volunteer provides services nothing expecting in return. This kind of ministry grows in the context of the ethics of a strictly rigorous deontology-service profession. In the case of a social worker, an attitude is also expected in which the central value is to help another person (ethics of the profession), although this is not a service or vocation in the strict sense, understood as duty and commitment to others primarily.

### Conclusion

It is a truism to say that societies are not free of problems. Some of them grow in the context of non-functional social structures, others are the expression of individual deviations. Both have dysfunctional character, although the degree of their dysfunctionality varies. It is the task of the social policy of the state, the component of which is social work, to alleviate their edge, and above all to eliminate their causes.

Bearing in mind the multiplicity of social problems, there is a need for different types of social policy and social work. However, what should be emphasized in relation to social work is a general principle that should always apply. "The practice of social work must deal *with values and in values*. It can never be composed of pure techniques. Differentiation of social work is not based on different methods, but on a relation between methods, social processes, and human purposes and values" ... "The social worker is a catalyst for the personal, familial,

and institutional work to be done for the best match between resources and life tasks, in accord with the essential values of human nature” (Constable, 1999:15).

Among the values, the most important is the human person. The good of the human person is also the final justification for social work. It takes place in every action, and above all in activities that grow in the context of commitment to the common good.

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