REVIEWS/RECENZJE

Silvia Fargion
Reflections on social work's identity: International themes in Italian practitioners' representation of social work. "International Social Work" 2008, 51 (2): 206–219

Reviewed by: Sandra Baldys

Today, in the 21st century, every country has many economic, demographic, and social problems such as, for example, homelessness, prostitution, poverty, addictions, and conflicts. Every day, social workers are fighting these, trying to resolve society's problems in each community. Social workers labor through a variety of activities and actions to improve the world, making efforts which benefit everyone.

Based on the academic books, legislation, and the internet sites which I have read, social work is considered a professional activity in our society whose aim is provide assistance to individuals and families. Such help encompasses the following elements: strengthening and recovering the ability to fulfill one's role and function in society. This profession is committed to creating good living conditions for people: children, adults, and the elderly – regardless of age, sex, religion, and ethnicity.

However, calling social work a profession sometimes seems controversial and this is what Silvia Fargion has taken under consideration in her article. I read this piece because of an interest in the identity of social work, especially in Italy. In clear, easy-to-understand English, this article gave me certain information about social work theory and practice, and thus broadened my knowledge about my field of study (and perhaps my future career).

Still, to start with, I (as a reader) expected that the author would put forward a definition of social work's identity, but there was none which was a slight disappointment. However, in reading further, I found three interesting points. Fargion does present: (1) the struggle to keep a balance between individual and social aspects of social work; (2) the tension between a scientific and a humanistic view of social work; and (3) the contrast between views of the profession as the application of existing theories or as theory-generating practice (2008: 209). Although I did not initially understand what

the author had in mind in these points, with time, I came to understand more about social work identity, theory, and then practice. In the six sections of the article, there was clear information as well as a pointing out of curiosities and aspects which were of special interest to me.

The first section was about social work in Italy. At the outset I was surprised to note that I had never heard about the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Looking for more information about this organization (as it seems important for us, Europeans), I found an interesting sentence: "Despite widespread deprivation, the return of democracy had brought excitement and hope in the future. Social work pioneers shared in this mood, hoping that the profession might contribute to democratization through its emphasis on active participation and self-determination"(2008: 210).

This quotation made me think that social work is a vital profession for all humanity as it contributes to freedom, justice, and the social order for people all around the world. It is also crucial to the civil society which is a part of the state's corpus. Activity and self-determination allow development in many areas, such as the social, economic, and cultural. This can be seen in Italy, and, of course, in Poland.

The second part of the article is about the study at hand, the 2005 SUNAS project, which examined social work in Italy, especially in the cities of Varese, Milano, Genova, Torino, Arezzo, Roma, Napoli, Salerno, Catania, and Lamezia. The author explains briefly what happened as a part of SUNAS and what it was about.

Fargion also writes about social work's duality – the duality between individual and social change, meaning individual-case work, but also social change-group work. An interesting topic was raised by Mary Richmond and Jane Adams. Fargion reminds us that they changed the perception of social work by, among other things, noting how women are very important to social work and are generally more coordinated in helping people.

An interesting quotation is "First one must listen, understand what is needed, and then begin planning (…) networking allows us to keep track of available resources; therefore, [social work is] reading the primary needs and resources on the territory, then planning" (2008: 211). In my opinion, it is important to structure contacts when engaging in social work, regardless of whether this is with one person or whole groups. A holistic approach in social work is wise as it creates more opportunities to help people. As I also read, good communication with a client is of key importance, too. Social workers must constantly emphasize how our work is oriented towards social goals. The core of our profession is dealing with systems and patterns of relationships, not just with individuals. Our perspective is more attentive to the mixed dynamics between the social and psychological, and this is our specialty. As mentioned earlier, social work is for people of a community.

Subsequently in the article, the author briefly explains her methodology, yet she does not give specific data which is problematic for the reader. Wanting a view of the whole and the possibility to comprehend the conclusions, one looks for, but finds no literature, not even a link. Still, a scholarly discourse about representations of practitioners is another part of Fargion's text; here she describes discussions regarding the scientific aspect of

social work in the international arena. That comprises the beginning of a discussion about professionalism in social work which is necessary to increase the level of governmental and non-governmental involvement with the client.

Not to be overlooked is the part about a new philosophy. The author calls attention to a new philosophy which declares that academic knowledge about poverty-related problems is required in order to act upon their root causes. This is something with which I fully agree, and which is possible when we apply a rational, open mind and proper management. Knowledge about human problems is very useful in practical assistance to the homeless, single mothers, kids, older people, etc. It is naturally assumed that social workers should increase their competencies to be both better workers and people in society.

Here Fargion says: "The issue of theory lurked behind discussions in all focus groups though in a controversial and heterogeneous way when it comes to defining one's identity" (2008: 212). Yet she has not fully and plainly explained the focus groups she used, the examples are brief, and references are made to authors not so familiar. The two models of professionalism in social work – technical-rational and the reflexive – were again unclear. These two concepts are neither explained nor developed.

In closing her article, Silvia Fargion highlights three keywords: holistic approach, complexity, and generalism. These connect with the fields of social work: case work, community work, and institutional work. As an Italian woman, she writes that scholars in her country associate a unitary vision of social work with the holistic. As a student, I know that the holistic perspective in social work is valid and important, but it would be valuable for me to what this really means in Italy. I would like to ask what the difference is between this perspective in Italy and in Poland.

In summary, knowledge, practice, holistic vision, and community are all evident components of social work found in each country around the globe. Social work is so interdisciplinary a field, and everywhere academics, social workers, and practitioners are organizing conferences, lectures, meetings, and write books. They try to accurately find the answer to the question: what is the identity of social work? This text showed me (or at least tried to show) a different perspective on social work in Italy.

Jaakko Seikkula
Becoming Dialogical: Psychotherapy or a Way of Life?. "The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy" 2011, 32 (3): 179–193

Reviewed by: Olga Maciejewska

The text focuses on one main issue: What could be more natural for the therapeutic process than the therapeutic dialogue? This article by Jaakko Seikkula shows that the idea of dialogue could be the basis for a coherent model of therapy which could be useful not only for neurotic but also psychotic patients. It is necessary to stress that this field is also a very important part of social work broadly understood. This justifies the beginning of reflections about the issue of therapy in the field of mental health.

Most important is that the readers of this paper can benefit from it. The article not only describes a kind of therapeutic model, but also contains a proposal for the reform of the psychiatric system in general. Jaakko Seikkula's article describes the possibility of a long-term and comprehensive change process. The aim is to develop a new model in the public social services based on the Open Dialogue Approach. Social workers, doctors, psychiatrists, nurses, and other specialists have to learn how to treat therapeutic processes in a new way. That is why I have chosen this paper.

Jaakko Seikkula writes: "After birth the first thing we learn is becoming a participant in dialogue. We are born in relations and those relations become our structure. Intersubjectivity is the basis of human experience and dialogue the way we live it" (2011: 179). The starting point is to explain what this dialogue entails – the dialogue or dialogism is a way of life. First we learn how to breathe and immediately afterwards we learn how to be an active participant in a discursive relationship. In such relations we (each and every one of us) react to the statements of the persons around us. Besides that, we initiate their reactions to our posts or expressions. The question is how we could understand this ordinary, everyday process as a therapeutic method. Dialogue has to be understood as something that is part and parcel of human life. All psychotherapies should be dialogic if they aim to be successful in bringing positive changes – for patients and for specialists. It is worth underlining that applying a dialogical approach means not only talking but also specifically mobilizing resources – the psychological above all. This concerns the patient as well as the family members.

Seikkula describes the realities of Finland. The practice of psychotherapy in this country has long been a part of the public health care system. Particularly important has been the development and research, since the 1960s, by Professor Yrjö Alanen and his team at the Psychiatric Clinic in Turku. Starting from individual psychodynamic therapy in the late 1970s, the team has integrated the methods of systemic family therapy into their work. They call this new approach, "The treatment adapted to the needs." This name has stressed that all of the therapeutic processes is unique and should be adapted to the different needs of the patient.

The revolutionary aspects of the new Need-Adapted Approach focus on:

- rapid and early intervention in each case;
- planning therapy meetings on the basis of the unique needs of each patient and his/her family through the integration of different therapeutic methods in a treatment process;
- the therapeutic approach as the basic orientation for all staff members during the diagnosis as well as the treatment;
- the perception of treatment as a continuous process; and
- constant monitoring of the progress and outcomes.

In an era dominated by the Evidence-Based Approach, this all can sound a bit radical, because the above assumptions challenge the main idea that therapists should always choose only one right method of treatment after doing the first diagnosis of the case. We can say this is the new way of thinking. The needs are in the spotlight. That point is one of the most important issues for me because the integration of different therapeutic methods in one treatment process means that we all – the members of the process – have to understand a lot of aspects. It is not easy – but it is worth it.

At the core of the perspective of the Need-Adapted Approach is that it aims to change the procedures and the structure of services delivery through micro-systemic changes. One of the most important innovations of the treatment adapted to the needs was the idea of open treatment meetings, meaning meetings to which patients and their families are invited from the very beginning. What is important, the staff members do not prepare the meeting, and it takes place in an open forum in which all the participants sit in a circle in the same room. This creates a space in the best way, I think: all the people can see and hear each other. Team members who have taken the initiative of convening a meeting are a part of the dialogue but do not plan who asks questions when. Therefore everyone can participate in conducting the interview. This is one of the most important and most interesting parts of the Open Dialogue Approach. There are increasingly more new aspects and perspectives, all of which can help to understand problems and to find the best solutions.

Moreover, the first questions should be as open as possible – the members of the family and others from the social network can start talking about issues that are essential at that moment. From the very beginning, the task of the interviewer is to adapt his/her responses to whatever the clients say – and want to say. The practice embodies a person-centered philosophy. In Open Dialogue Approach meetings, the focus is on strengthening the adult side of the patient and normalizing the situation instead of focusing on regressive behavior.

The starting point for treatment is to give voice to the family in describing the situation. Problems are seen as socially constructed and are reformulated in every conversation. All the persons present are encouraged to speak in their own unique voice. It is necessary to add that the described approach contrasts with conventional therapy, because the position of the therapist is not to make interventions. While many schools of family therapy are interested in creating some kind of specific forms of conducting an interview,

the Open Dialogue Approach is much more important concentrated on listening and responding straightaway. I think it can teach how to treat people respectfully and how to be in fulfilling relations with others. Listening should be understood as an element leading to understanding.

I think that one of the most important aspects of the polyphony (which is a main part of the Open Dialogue Approach) is the voice of each therapist. Participating in the dialogue are psychologists, doctors, family therapists, and so on. In addition, therapists participate in the meeting in their personal voices. "If a therapist has experienced the loss of someone near to her, these voices of loss and sadness become a part of the polyphony. Not in the sense that therapists would speak of their own experiences of death, but in the way they adapt themselves to the present moment: how they sit, how they look at the other speakers, how they change their intonation and so on" (2011: 189). The inner voices of individual persons can become a part of the present moment. They are a powerful part of the dialogue. I see that mutual understanding is a foundation of the therapeutic process. The clients and therapists live in common, embodied experiences which take place before the patient experiences an expression in words. The dialogue emerges as intersubjective consciousness. Our social identity is constructed by adjusting our actions to those of others.

It is necessary to add that research in the field of open dialogue with first episode psychotic patients is systematically carried out in the Western Lapland of Finland. The results are favorable in the treatment of psychosis. At 5-year follow-up, 85% of the patients did not have psychotic symptoms and 85% have returned to full professional life (2011: 190). Only one third of the patients use antipsychotics. There is also evidence pointing to the fact that, in 25 years of the practice of open dialogue, the incidence of schizophrenia in Western Lapland has declined.

The article by Jaakko Seikkula calls for a debate on critical questions for the future of social work and the services system. This system does need to be changed. As professionals we should learn to follow the lives of our clients and trace their language – completely without preconditions. It is not easy; in fact, this is a big challenge for me. However, Open Dialogue Approach can be understood as a very interesting way to improve interactions in the field of social work. It is worth reading about this novel approach to gain knowledge about how to integrate this model into everyday social work.

We are all born into relationships. Nothing more is needed than to be heard and taken seriously. The key is to generate the dialogical relation. The flexibility and mobility of adapting therapy to the unique needs of every client and his/her family makes sense to me in the Need-Adapted Approach. The psychological continuity of integrating staff members from different services guarantees the possibility to create one's own understanding of the issue.

This text discusses emerging questions connected with the viability of a new perspective in the practice of social work. Social workers should always look for new solutions, activities, and models which can improve practice. The importance of evaluation in the field of social work must be emphasized. Social work should be focused on the contexts

and relationships, and not only on the individual client. The idea of the holistic perspective means that the social worker should always take various aspects of the client's life into consideration – and then connect them with the conditions of the social system.

Joelle Ruben
Can Social Work Students Learn Empathy?. "Social Work Today" 2015, 15 (2): 12–15

Reviewed by: Dominika Grosz

The article, written by Joelle Ruben, is about empathy directly associated with social work and social workers. More specifically, the author wonders whether empathy is something which students of social work can learn. The question of whether a school, university, and coursework can have an impact on the understanding of emotions and feelings by students is still quite timely. The author of the article pays special attention to empathy associated with multiculturalism, schools, and universities.

What is empathy? To start reflecting on a need for this in social workers, we should discover what it is. The author of this article cites the definition of the Social Work Dictionary and defines empathy as: "The act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person (Barker 2003: 13). The Cambridge Dictionaries say that empathy is: "The ability to imagine what it must be like to be in someone's situation" (2016).

In my opinion, these two definitions are very similar. Compassion, understanding, patience, shared joy and sadness: all this is, for me, empathy which is so needed in the social work profession. It is primarily imagining and sympathizing with the situation of another person. Key here is that two different people in the same situation will feel different.

The author mentions various studies on this subject. First mentioned is a research study done by Kristen Zaleski, conducted among students of social work. She examined empathic behavior among students, thought the results were inconclusive. Other studies described relate to neurobiology. The author described this as: "The study of neural pathways originating in the brain" (Ruben 2015: 14). We have something of a predisposition to being empathic, but we should continually learn how to listen to body language or observe the client's face.

It is important to understand that social work should constantly educate and teach. Furthermore, education should not only be in the practical areas of social work, but also in the metaphysical as, for instance, with empathy. In my opinion, the social worker must be prepared for work with clients in difficult situations where in empathetic behavior will be necessary. Additionally, it is very important in this field to take an individual approach towards each client. Each problem will be perceived from several different

perspectives in a completely different way. Moreover, the author underscores in her article that a social worker must, in diverse situations, look at a problem from varied viewpoints. In my opinion, this is the true art of being empathic.

Setting aside opinions and views is very important. The social worker should not explain or express his or her opinion about what should be done. The social worker should simply point the way towards a solution appropriate for his client. For me, crucial to social work is an individual approach to each problem and the author of this text agrees.

The author also points out that practice is the key to success. Exercising empathetic behavior, looking for this in ourselves, and training can help to build better contact with the client. In short, this means that practice makes perfect. The article also states that: "Educators have a professional responsibility to integrate empathy into students' academic journey" (Ruben 2015: 15). On the basis of research, she proposes creating a special place for students of social work where they can share their experiences and thinking. From the perspective of just such a student, I think that setting up such a place at my university could be very beneficial.

Support for students of social work and the opportunity to develop the skills to empathize and feel the emotions of another person is, in my opinion, highly necessary. I would like the student – irrespective of where he or she comes from, whether male or female, or whatever his or her view – to be able to separate (as the author puts it) the text from the work.

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Peter de Jong, Alaina Cronkright
Learning Solution-Focused Interviewing Skills: BSW Student Voices. "Journal of Teaching in Social Work" 2011, 31: 21–37

Reviewed by: Dominika Curyło

This article describes the 15-year evolution of a course devoted to teaching one of the key elements of social work: conducting interviews with clients. It specifically concerns solution-focused interviewing (SFI) and the skills this technique requires. The course was designed partly by BSW students so it focuses also on the role they played in shaping the course overall. This article is based on a perspective which implies that, just as practitioners can learn much about the nature of their work from their clients, so social work educators can learn much about how to teach from their students.

Creating a social work course by putting students in the educator's place and giving them chance to influence the basis of the reality in which they live is a very innovative approach. Usually social work educators are the persons who design a course in its entirety and students are confronted with an already prepared program. With this approach students are less motivated to learn and take on additional tasks. In contrast, when students contribute to a course, they will appreciate it much more.

The reviewed article presents a theory connected with a social work course as well as extended data collected in the research. In the beginning, the authors describe solution-focused interviewing and emphasize that interviewing is the most important activity in social work. It is time-consuming and demanding, but the way in which practitioners interview clients is essential to effective practice. SFI was developed over the past 30 years through the work of specialists from the Brief Family Therapy Center in the USA. It was made for interviewing individuals and couples and now it is used in work with treatment groups, task groups, organizations, and communities. A very clever idea was to first present some discoveries made by the Brief Family Therapy Center: (1) clients who know what they want to change in their lives can improve their situations very quickly; (2) not focusing on the problems helps in making greater progress; and (3) asking about past successes is needed to build new ones. The authors mention that SFI is appreciated mostly for concrete interviewing skills such as miracle questions, exception questions, complimenting, scaling questions, and coping questions. They explain and emphasize that these kinds of queries are a "not-knowing" and permit the clients to strengthen their self-determination: the clients are made "the expert" by being consistently put in a position to tell the interviewer about themselves and their situations.

The next part of the article focuses on the design of the described social work course. Originally it focused on active listening and empathy skills. For practice, students were making an audio recording about a personal concern. Graduating seniors were asked what they wanted to change; their response was that they would have appreciated: (1) less lecture and explanation; (2) more role-play practice;(3) immediate and ongoing feedback on their skills from experienced interviewers; and (4) more demonstration

of skills applicable to practicum settings. After course reorganization, the skills taught began to change from active listening and empathy to solution-focused competencies. Those issues which the students wanted to change reveal the weakest sides of social work courses. Another thing students saw as requiring modification was the way lab classes were organized. Suggested was that lab coaches be persons who had graduated from the same program and were currently in social work practice. After these recommendations the lab has been changed into a more practice-oriented form. The next thing changed in the redesign process was shifting the focus from what the interviewer was doing wrong to observing and emphasizing what the interviewer did well.

The following part of the article concerns the research in which students responded to questions connected with the course design. It turns out that approximately 95% of the respondents stated that the course "contributed greatly" to their preparation as social work practitioners. These evaluations made other students more sure about SFI and its value. Throughout the course, students had to write an assignment which helped in the collection of qualitative data. Students had to answer two questions: (1) "reflect on the significance of different aspects of the course to you"; and (2) "give a detailed personal account of how you view yourself functioning as a professional interviewer at this time." Authors mention that, over the years, students have consistently chosen to write about those aspects of the course which they believe contribute most to learning SFI skills. Additionally, the authors provide us with the research methodology as well as additional information about difficulties connected with the construction of the questions and the given answers – all of which shows us an extended view of this study.

The assignment content was analyzed and entered as a qualitative data file. Themes mentioned by students were divided into main themes and subthemes. Among the themes mentioned were: lab experience, books on professional self-development, books on loss, videotape, class discussion, miracle question, role-playing, exercises in class, interviewing protocols, combined readings, and textbooks. Out of 44 students, 37 wrote about the lab experience as one of four essential aspects of the course. 17 students indicated a book on professional self-development as a significant aspect. There were various subthemes for lab experience such as:

1) *Constructive feedback* – Students said that both the instructors and peers do give lab feedback and indicate that this helps in preserving the most useful elements of interviewing and changing the useless ones;
2) *Learning from experience* – 19 students cited learning from experience as a subtheme and emphasized that "knowing is doing." According to this approach the most effective way of learning is practicing;
3) *Observing others* – The next subtheme cited by 15 students was the usefulness of observation in this setting. This helps students to draw from others and to adopt solution-focused interviewing skills themselves. One of surveyed students said that "I found that watching others interview is just as valuable, if not even more valuable than actually interviewing. I learned a lot of other skills just by watching

other members of my group perform an interview." It indicates that observing others is crucial when it comes to acquiring solution-focused interviewing skills;
4) *Preparation as professional* – Students were grateful for a chance to use experience from lab practice;
5) *Safe environment* – In the research study, students mentioned that, at the outset, they were very worried and anxious about doing an interview in front of people, but, after a few months, they became more confident. It helps not only in the field of interviewing but it also strengthens communication and other needed skills for making contact with people;
6) *Practice-rich lab instructors* – Students also mentioned that lab educators should themselves have experience;
7) *Discussions in lab*; and
8) *Role-playing real client situations* – This helps to perceive the client's point of view.

These briefly described themes and subthemes give us – social workers and students – the possibility to learn new ways by which to improve our educational and professional environment. Lab learning is not the only skill desired by future social workers: they are also interested in situating their acquired competencies within the context of professional self-development and theoretical knowledge about cases experienced in the lab. This represents the need to connect practice with the professional literature. The research study discussed herein describes extended qualitative data which, in my opinion, is comprehensive enough for readers to better comprehend the solution-focused way of interviewing.

The next part of the article brings in relevant research and theory. It turns out that there is little quantitative or qualitative research devoted to the teaching and learning of interviewing skills of any type. The ones which already exist show that skills increased *via* techniques such as role-playing, feedback, modeling, and working in small groups. The same situation concerns qualitative data. When it comes to pertinent theories, the authors mention experiential learning theory which holds that effective learning depends on inter-playing experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Once again we see that social work practice must go hand in hand with theory.

The final section of this article provides a few suggestions for social work education. Here we can again see student opinions about the importance of learning and its influence on confidence gained in interviewing, as well as about their highest achievements in the lab setting in which they could apply various skills. Despite the positive survey results from *practicum* instructors and employers, the authors warn us that there is still no direct outcome data about the transfer of skills from the lab into actual practice settings. In conclusion, the authors recall the sentence "just as practitioners can learn much about how to practice effectively from clients, educators can learn much about how to teach from students."

Overall, this is a very interesting article presenting an innovative approach to the issue of social work courses for students. I have not encountered before this kind of

social work course design wherein students take part to prepare the foundations of their didactic program. This experience seems very valuable for the students across their entire process of studying and gaining needed practice. This is true for students that get involved in such a project as this one (as well as for those who do not), because they, too, will benefit from the improvement of the social work course. I found very noteworthy the detailed description of the group sessions for BSW students.

Although this article is well-written, it does have some limitations. First of all, it describes the advantages of designing a social work course with the help of students, but it does not include any critical feedback concerning this approach. For example, some critical feedback from a social work educator's position would be very complementary to the whole article. Another issue concerning this piece is the fact that the survey used for evaluating the students' attitudes towards learning solution-interviewing skills was conducted only among 44 BSW students which does not seem a sufficiently reliable sample.

In summary, however, I think this article is very valuable overall. It is not only a survey report but also a useful aid in better understanding solution-focused interviewing and the specific skills linked to this approach. I would recommend this article for any social worker who believes we can either work with only learned theory or only gained experience.