INTRODUCTION

Focusing the analytical investigation on professional discussions (for example those occurring in the context of multi-professional team case work) it is necessary to notice that the insider’s viewpoints are (re)presented directly by the perspectives of the participants (professionals), and not the client himself or herself. The idea of “empowerment” is complicated too, because the term needs to be considered on two theoretical levels: as indirect activity oriented onto the clients’ social strength (this aspect is often a topic of the discussion and a part

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of its content), and as direct activity oriented onto the interactional position (conversational strength) of the participant (this aspect is reflected in the structure of the discussion).

The first aspect of the conversational reality of social work can be developed by descriptions of conversational (interactional) mechanisms of instructing, shaping, and controlling the clients’ life. Not only the range of the activity is established and adjusted in a professional discussion, but also the direction of the influence. A social worker can provide more energy into client’s everyday activity (empowerment) or limit it by restrictions, external instructions and extended control. However, the phenomenon is much more complicated, because of the fact that power (rooted in knowledge and resources) is a very important tool of social work.

The second dimension is connected with the distribution of power in institutionalized space. The allocation of power (conversational status) is, in a nutshell, a result of the act of giving the floor to the participants taking part in a professional discussion. Some participants have a higher social status (psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, etc.) and some have a lower one (social workers), so some of them have to struggle for their opinions to be taken into consideration. The situation raises a reflection on the empowering social work perspective in professional discussions.

The last few decades seem to be a period of increasing attention – focused on power and the so-called “internal” perspective or the perspective of the “client/user” – that is paid by social work researchers and theoreticians.

Power relations and communication in social work have been scrutinized, analyzed, and developed many times in numerous books, articles, and speeches all over the world. In the context of the social work research, power relations are identified mainly between a client and different social settings (like neighborhood, community, and even the society as a system). From time to time, hidden and visible acts of power in social worker-client relation are analyzed, usually in terms of professional action (Schütze, 1992; 1994; Granosik, 2000). The important achievement of the study is a description and an
explanation of the relative nature of power in social micro-context, and strategic application of advanced power in daily routines of professional social workers.

The limitations of the text render it impossible to attempt the systemic presentation of the contemporary perspectives on the social reality, but it is worth pointing out some important findings:

- social participation and borders of life worlds are not solid, but continuously reconstructed during interactions;
- social differences have been unified by social processes like: globalization, increasing influences of mass communication;
- modern massmedial tendencies, like political correctness, superficially reconstruct some social boundaries (certain social differences are removed from the surface of the public discourse and hidden underneath);
- classic division into private, economic, and civil sphere of activity is not quite clear because of the process of permanent education and professionalization in each aspect of human life.

However, these very influential discoveries have changed the perspective on power applied in social services and social work research, which is clearly visible in numerous works with “empowerment” in titles and in the development of the participatory research. In addition, some aspects of the findings can be critically examined from the perspective of conversation analysis.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL DISCOURSE ON SOCIAL WORK

The important assumption of many concepts of empowerment and radical social work is a double structure of the contemporary social reality that consists of the external social world manned by powerful people (for example social workers) and the world of vulnerable, powerless groups, rejected by the society. The complexity and multidimensional nature of the internal-external distinction have been described in numerous theories, but the question still remains how social work is influenced by the concepts.
One of the possible answers to the question might be drawn from the results of the research focused on interpretive patterns and actions of Polish social workers. The analysis of numerous discussions conducted by social workers has revealed the difference between the internal and the external discourse (Granosik, 2012).

The internal variation of the discourse was constructed when the only participants of the discussion were social workers, their coworkers, or people very well-informed about the social work practice (the “wise” persons in Erving Goffman’s terms, see: Goffman, 1979, p. 31-44). In this case, the discourse was very technical and administrative, based on practical knowledge, for example, about the “tested” procedures of passing external controlling. The clients were then often reduced to the role of the reactive objects of work that needed to be navigated in the daily routine of their life course. The discussions made a real platform for sharing experiences, usually very constructive, informative, and counseling in nature. The internal discourse was, from time to time, also the arena of competition and even struggle for interactional or argumentative dominance, and the result of the fight was a social situational status, identity, a concept of action undertaken in the case work, etc.

The character of the discourse devoted to social work was changed when another participant – perceived as “external” – joined the discussion. In this case, the arguments were not so much technical, but rather referred to humanistic approaches, the code of ethics, and modern tendencies with respect to the client’s subjectivity, human rights, empowerment, and professional autonomy. The discourse, on such occasion, was often much more critical and oriented onto positive self-presentation – in contrast to the difficult objective conditions prevailing in the field social work. The critical bias of the arguments was oriented externally and did not touch the internal relations, which made it possible to maintain coherent and common argumentative perspective of the social workers who speak the same voice. In this type of discourse, there was no place for internal differences, no reason to argue, and the paramount subject was
consensual criticism of external conditions and factors influencing the social work practice.

In the context of power relations in social work, the first discourse (internal) is a platform for the mechanisms of power distribution among the professional participants of social work, and the second one (external) constitutes rather consolidated power of social work in wider social contexts, like the public discourse or relations with one’s principals and other organizations (Granosik, 2012, p. 196-197).

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY, CONVERSATION ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL WORK

The regular criticism, as well as the research conduct, need to be grounded in a coherent set of theoretical assumptions. Among many possibilities that are currently promoted, the discursive or conversation perspective seems to be underexploited. The main ideas of conversation analysis are very well described in numerous works by Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and others (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974; Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2007), so instead of repeating them again, it will be better to present the general assumptions referring to social work.

A very important finding of ethnomethodology is that the structure of speaking acts delivers general information about the structure of the social reality (for example institutional) including power relations (see: Granosik, 2010b). To cut the long story short, social work is a sequence of professional conversations located in social discourses. Adopting the general theoretical assumptions of conversation analysis into the institutional reality leads to the conclusion that exploration of power relations demands conducting research into professional communication, additionally focused on the structure of the phenomenon (how people act using words).

For example, power relations established by interdisciplinary team members (social workers, psychologists, pedagogues or representatives
of other social professions) consist of sequential acts of speaking to other professionals, clients, principals, etc. The point of professional activity (talking) lies in sustained exertion of a kind of pressure:

- on colleagues, to convince them to one’s own project of action,
- on principals, to obtain the permission or acceptance,
- on a client, to change his/her action, attitude, motivation, etc., according to the adopted scheme of action.

Such communicative strategies of influence or control make an important field of interest for conversation analysis that offers tools for direct research into professional action, contrary to other methods of indirect research (Granosik, 2010b).

The modern concept of communication should be supplemented by the modern perspective on institutions. The concept of an institution, elaborated generally by discursive new institutionalism, concerns two main elements: rules of action and discursive mechanisms of changing them. From this perspective, an institution is rather a set of coordinated discourses than a formal organization with resources and possessions (Torfing, 2001, p. 283-284). The synchronization of the actions is made possible, generally, by a set of values and methods still negotiated in internal discussions and the external professional/public discourse. The public dimension of institutional discourses makes them, on the one hand, inevitably – at least – politics-sensitive and often – also – politics-dependent [WP?] (Torfing, 1998, p. 137-138; Torfing, 2001, p. 286-287), and on the other hand, it gives a chance to use the public discourse as a tool of institutional activity (Granosik, 2010a). Thus, other macro-contextual (political) power relations should also be taken into consideration.

Generally, the structure of a professional discussion is a fundamental structure of a given institution, i.e. the structure of conversational power relations (positions, statuses) is a real internal stratification, and successful degradation of the participants, values or methods during a discussion influences the real activity of the institution (values/actions have to be changed, hidden or the institution has to be divided) (Granosik, 2010b). Therefore, a conversational (discursive) strength is indeed a real kind of power.
THE MATRIX OF POWER RELATIONS IN INSTITUTIONAL SOCIAL WORK

Power relations in the context of social work are mainly limited to the interactions between a social worker and the clients. Even in a more radically-oriented concept of social work, the main dimension of power is perceived between the society and a social institution, on the one side, and vulnerable groups of people, on the other. A little bit more complicated picture of power relations in social work emerges if the perspective of conversation analysis is adopted to reconstruct in detail the social organization of social work.

On the basis of my latest cases of research\(^2\), it was possible to reconstruct the matrix of power relations in team social work\(^3\) that is conducted in municipal centers for social assistance. As shown on Figure 1, power interactions are mostly condensed in the team itself that seems to be the heart of the power distribution system. In my research, I found many examples of how the matrix of internal power relations influenced the power relation with a client. It seems quite evident that an interaction with a client is theoretically constructed in professional team discussions, but some relations with a client can influence the professional discussion as well. Generally, power relations are a fragile and flexible constellation that is complex and coherent, but its construction is not necessarily based on simple extrapolating internal team relations. Many a time, a professional discussion is a type of interactional strategic game the professionals play, with hidden goals and intentions, and its result is not simply implemented in relations with the clients, but reconstructed according to the hidden dimension of the interaction.

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\(^2\) Research conclusions presented in the text are based on two projects I have participated in: “Creation and Developing the Standards of Social Services” (a project coordinated by the Institute of Public Affairs and subsided by the EU), „Social Work and Professional Discussion – an Institutional Analysis in Conversational Perspective“ (a project funded by a grant of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education).

\(^3\) The empirical data was collected in Polish governmental organizations operating within the social services sector (Municipal Centers for Social Assistance), but there is no evidence that the conclusions have to be limited to this type of organizations only.
It is very important to perceive the matrix of power relations as an open system that is influenced by important external factors, such as formal power (senior management staff members of the organization occupying different positions), the society (the political system the and public discourse), and even the clients’ families, neighbors and the local community. The influence of the external conditions may not be limited to the shaping effect only, as between the professionals and their principals and, to some extent, the public discourse as well, there is a kind of institutional game with an important role of professional ideologies that are a kind of an interpretive key. To make the complicated system of dependence simpler, it could be resumed that external factors have the important direct influence when they are compatible with professional ideologies, otherwise the internal relations and relations with a client are the result of the principals’ indications, public discourses streams, or community demands only superficially and the “real” work with a client is steered rather by professional ideologies, adopting professional tricks or a strategic “double game”.
STRATEGIES OF (RE)CONSTRUCTING A POWER RELATION IN MULTI-PROFESSIONAL TEAM WORK

As it was shown previously, adopting a conversational perspective makes the network of power relations in social work more complicated and more flexible. In this context, internal power relations in multi-professional teams seem to be especially important, because, beyond the interactional level, an important role is taken by the formal power (institutional position of the participants), disciplinary/professional stratification (a social status of the discipline/profession), general trends or streams referring to the problem or social work in general. Generally, the system of power relations is adjusted to keep the effectiveness of the organization on a socially accepted level, but there are some cases when the domination of interactional struggles makes the organization less effective or even ineffective in terms of social goals.

The organization of multi-professional team work is additionally complicated by incoherent internal tendencies to maintain the general ritual agreement (professional loyalty), on the one hand, and to differentiate the power of participants by individual features, disciplinary specialties, and a formal position. This immanent tension becomes a new challenge for the team, because it needs to be controlled not to excessively unify the participants of the multi-professional team, or to limit the emancipation and differentiation of the participants’ statuses, as it might render the cooperation impossible.

The central role of the team in contemporary organizations is strongly emphasized in modern concepts of the “learning organization”, concerning the concepts stating that “team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations (...) [and] unless a team can learn, the organization cannot learn” (Senge, 1990, p. 10). Team work is a way of sharing real objectives and understanding that influence activity of the whole organization (Taylor, 2004, p.82).

The application of conversation analysis gives a chance to observe the phenomena on the micro-level of social relations with a detailed
specification of elemental strategies of the power relations construction. Negotiations and struggles for situational status in professional discussions are some of the basic processes that shape the structure of the social organization of social work, because a higher position in the discussion ensures, at least, more power:

- to define the core problem of the client;
- to diagnose the reasons of the problem;
- to define the actions that need to be undertaken;
- to define the criteria of evaluation.

The situational status might be built by adopting some conversational strategies supported by external conditions like the social status of the profession, formal position, informal power, knowledge and experience, etc. Some of the regular strategies, that were observed and analyzed as part of the above-referred research, were as follows:

- strategies of expertness constructing,
- strategies of applying the formal power,
- conversational involvement and determination,
- hidden and informal strategies.

However, the list of the items enumerated above is not complete and does not include the variations of the regular strategies. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of power relations in social work demands these categories to be developed a little.

EXPERTNESS

Being an expert in a multi-professional team means having power to shape the thematic organization of the discussion, deciding what the team is talking about, and what kind of action will be arranged in contact with the client. Expertness is not a static attribute of a person directly connected to the level of education or professional experience, but it is a kind of a situational status that is permanently and processually reconstructed (degraded, confirmed, increased, removed, etc). There are at least several strategies leading to being perceived as an expert and, generally, expertness can be a result of one’s own achievements or someone else’s nomination.
Being nominated an expert is the best way to obtain a relatively high position in a team within a short period of time. A very instructive example of this type of expertness might be derived from the procedures of introducing/addressing people. In one team, the leader, presenting the participants of the discussion, addressed the family assistants, social workers, a psychologist, and a pedagogue in a different manner.

Leader: These are two of our assistants\(^4\), that is Tadeusz Suj... Yes? I’ve been always afraid... (smile) Sujczak or Suj... yeach, Sujczak, Sujczak, mhm, and Mo... Monika Kraf... Kreft-Zaczyńska (laugh) and here are our specialists, Mrs. psychologist, Mr. pedagogue.

Psychologist: this is Małgorzata, this is a psychologist (laugh)
Leader: Katarzyna Sadownik, this is Mr. Grzegorz Kaniak.
Family assistant: Nice to meet you.
Social worker: Social worker, Jadwiga Barska.\(^5\)

There were three types of introducing/addressing the participants, the first (in case of family assistants) was professional: formal position and name, the second (in relation to the psychologist and the pedagogue) was also professional, but with emphasized expertness: special introduction (“our specialists”) and the profession/discipline represented by them mentioned as well. The third type of addressing people (concerning the social worker) is an example of a professional self-presentation: position and name, and appeared because the social worker was skipped (forgotten) in the formal presentation on the part of the leader. The differentiated addressing manner initiated the correction procedure undertaken by the psychologist, who made the inequality visible. The leader corrected the way of his presenting people by mentioning the names of the specialists, but the social worker was still absent in the presentation.

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4 Family assistant is a professional position in the Municipal Center for Social Assistance.

5 To keep the anonymity of the participants their names have been changed.
All types of introducing/addressing people influence their expertness; the first and, especially, the second group of participants were nominated as experts by the leader, and the social worker achieved the status of the initial expertness herself. Of course, there are many more strategies to establish expertness in the theoretical and practical field of interest. In the first mentioned field, being an expert is often a result of a successful presentation concerning the conceptual interpretation of the analyzed case derived from a theoretical system, usually grounded in some scientific discipline or research. Practical expertness can be achieved on the basis of the knowledge on the organization of social services, including such information like: recruiting procedures, payment, range of activity, efficiency, etc. Another important factor might also be personal contact with professionals from the organizations.

FORMAL POWER

Expertness, established as a result of nomination, influences mainly the content of the discussion that is being saturated by theoretical concepts and technical knowledge about organizations. In the perspective of conversation analysis, formal power is an important condition impacting the structure of professional discussion, but only if power is applied into the discussion. Thus, the importance of formal power depends on the activity of these participants who have higher formal positions. There are many aspects of professional discussion (and social work in general) that are shaped by formal power, most significant of them being as follows:

- turn (voice) allocation power (interruptions, timing, overlaps, adjacency pairs, the right to the last turn)
- power to conclude and summarize (formal status, professional ranking)
- control over documentary work (conversational power of dictating)

According to the conversation analysis approach, turn allocation is one of the most important aspects of conversation that describes how turns are organized (allocated) among the participants (Sacks,
Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974: 696-735; Granosik, 2010b). The right to control the turn-taking means the authority over the team work. Fortunately, nobody has the total control over the conversation, but formal power can be applied to limit the time of selected turns or to interrupt the unwanted or unaccepted voices, including overlapping these voices (speaking simultaneously).

The license to manage the conversation is not only limited to the turn allocation component, formal power usually gives the right to construct the general findings and conclusions. It is a very important tool to take or keep control over team work should some unaccepted voices appear in the discussion. Naturally, the right to the last turn cannot be abused too much, because the formal position can be confronted with experts’ argumentation if the ideas are not taken into account enough.

The last advantage of formal power is a consequence of the type of an organization (GO or NGO) and its bureaucratic structure. Governmental organizations in Poland demand advanced paperwork and multi-professional team work is not an exception, so usually the obligatory documentation is created during the discussion, but it contains only the selected information. The formal leader (chairman) of the team has the right to dictate what should be contained in the documents, and what should not. Very often, the participant with formal power moderates the discussion according to the documentation that needs to be prepared.

As a result, a high formal position of one speaker can influence the other participants’ activity and force the direction of the diagnosis, plan of actions, etc. preferred by him/her. The influence very often is not limited to only situational taking control over the professional discussion, but includes almost full coordination of the paperwork that is done at the same time, as, in many cases, the documents should be signed by the leader for their validation. Summing up the above description/explanation of the crucial role of formal power. it is worth mentioning that there is the synchronization of the professional discussion, grounded in the participants’ expertness, and documentary reality, as well as in the formal structures of the organization (statutes, acts, regulations, etc).
CONVERSATION INVOLVEMENT AND DETERMINATION

The real picture of the multi-professional discussions has to be supplemented by the description of the human nature of the participants that must be taken into account to make some aspects of team social work accountable. The emotional involvement of the participants has some influence on the course of the discussion, because it enhances the general conversational activity of the person and makes the audience more open (and even tractable) to emotionally expressed suggestions. The phenomenon of increasing conversational strength of arguments that are constructed with over-average involvement is very rational, as the personal engagement means better knowledge about the case and better motivation to change the lifecourse of the client. However, the exact reason of the involvement can be of different nature (sometimes it is a very strong will to help the client in trouble, sometimes the determination to limit a misuse of financial social support, sometimes the ambition to improve one’s own efficiency or just to finish a troublesome case). In addition, the personally involved participant gets more power to influence the diagnosis and strategies of working with the client.

HIDDEN AND INFORMAL STRATEGIES

It would be too naïve and optimistic to analyze only the visible power relations that appear in official (formal) discussions. The well-described – in sociological literature - phenomenon of the institutional “double life” or “underlife” (Goffman, 1978; Gutierrez, Rymes, Larson, 1995) takes place in almost all social organizations, and the municipal centers for social assistance are no exception. The “underlife” discussions are activated when the formal limitations (including different forms of formal power) or the distance between the formal principals and the professionals make negotiations and, as a result, also supporting the professional standards quite impossible. In such cases, an official professional discussion is strategically constructed on the grounds of informal negotiations that are
undertaken by a part of the team. Naturally, the leader of the team never participates in the informal meetings or exchange of opinions. The predictability of the formally restricted discussion course gives a chance to project a strategic participation that will be oriented onto forming the discussion in such a was so as to achieve the informally designed results (usually the plan of action). The power relations visible in the official discussion are a strategic consequence of the power relations constituted during the informal conversation.

WHAT DOES “EMPOWERMENT” MEAN IN THE COMPLICATED POWER RELATIONS?
SOME FINAL REMARKS

Analyzing the meaning of “empowerment” in social work is at least problematic (see: Adams, 1996, p. 10-13), because the term is defined as a social construct, or as a critically understood concept, or as a reflective practice, and in all these meanings it has yet to achieve the maturity (Baistow, 1994, p. 35-38). Despite the fact that empowerment is a very important and progressive topic in social work-related theoretical and practical discourse, it is used frequently also in social care. According to the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Work: “the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being” (IASSW, IFSW, 2001). Thus, “empowerment aims to use specific strategies to reduce, eliminate, combat and reverse negative valuations by powerful groups in society affecting certain individuals and social groups” (Payne, 1991, p. 229). In both these concepts (by IASSW&IFSW and Payne), empowerment is perceived as certain changes in the power relations between a client and the society (including social services).

Considering the previously presented elaborated matrix of power relations in social work and the conversation analysis perspective, these definitions of empowerment seem to be inadequate and need to be reconstructed. In terms of conversation analysis, empowerment
is rather an intentional act of increasing the conversational (discursive) power of the social participants, and not necessarily the client himself or herself. As it was shown and grounded in the research, in the organization of team work, the position of a social worker is very underprivileged and has to be empowered. This modification of power relations would make the professionals’ positions more equal and the diagnoses, the projected plans of help, etc. more balanced, without a fixed domination of any discipline. It does not mean that the statuses of the participants would not be changed, but the statuses would be modified as a result of situational dynamics of the discussion, and not the previously designed formal stratification.

The research, that has been presented above, indicates not only the direction of empowerment, but also the technical way in which the modernization might be implemented. The simplest way to empower a social worker is to adjust the formal organization of municipal centers of social assistance to the fundamental assumption of inter-professional team work, i.e. the equal initial status of each participant. This postulate, relatively easy to apply, appears much more complicated if the social (discursive) context is taken into consideration, since the stratification of professions, reflected in the formal organization of work, is socially constructed and is rather the result of social processes than an independent source of inequality in the team. It makes the postulated modernization quite broad and not so easily applicable. Some solution to the issue of inequality might be different organization of the formal power structure. Empowering a social worker through the nomination to the leader of the team could increase her or his status and, as a result, reframe the structure of the team into a more balanced one.

Résumé

TRAVAIL SOCIAL DE LA PERSPECTIVE CONVERSATIONNELLE : DISCUSSION PROFESSIONNELLE ET POUVOIR

Dans le travail social, la « perspective interne » est en général associée au point de vue du client de l’aide sociale. Tout aussi que l’« empowerment »
qui dans la plupart d’analyses se limite aux personnes et groupes marginalisés et plus vulnérables socialement. Toutefois, les analyses des discussions menées entre les professionnels montrent le besoin d’une définition plus élargie et approfondie de ces catégories-là.

La focalisation des réflexions analytiques sur les discussions des professionnels (par exemple sur le travail dans des équipes interdisciplinaires) nous montre une perspective différente où « le point de vue interne » reflète la perspective des participants de la discussion, donc des professionnels, pas du client. Nous retrouvons le même niveau de complication dans l’idée d’« empowerment », car elle peut être analysée sur deux niveaux : en tant qu’une intervention indirecte sur la force sociale du client (l’aspect faisant souvent l’objet des discussions) et une intervention directe orientée sur la position interactive de celui qui participe à la discussion (l’aspect qui se reflète dans la structure de la discussion).

Le premier aspect peut être développé à partir des descriptions de mécanismes conversationnels (interactifs) qui orientent, construisent et contrôlent la vie des clients. Pourtant, dans la discussion professionnelle, l’on ne décide pas que de l’étendue de cette activité, mais également des axes d’interactions. Le travailleur social peut activer plus le client dans sa vie quotidienne ou bien son action peut être limitée par des restrictions, des règlements internes, ou bien un contrôle rigoureux. Ce phénomène se complique davantage du fait que le pouvoir (basant sur le savoir et l’accès aux ressources) est un outil de travail majeur.

Le second aspect est lié à la distribution du pouvoir dans l’espace institutionnelisé, à l’allocation du son statut conversationnel, celui-ci étant le résultat de la distribution de la parole dans la discussion professionnelle. Certains participants de cette discussion bénéficient d’un statut social plus important (psychologues, psychiatres, juristes, etc.) que d’autres (travailleur social) qui doivent lutter pour être entendus. On pourrait donc se demander s’il ne faudrait pas renforcer la perspective du travailleur social dans la discussion professionnelle.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


