

POSITIVE ATTITUDE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: CONTEXT OF LITHUANIA

DANUSEVIČIENĖ LINA¹

LITHUANIAN UNIVERSITY OF HEALTH SCIENCE, LITHUANIA

MAŽYLYTĖ JUSTINA

LITHUANIAN UNIVERSITY OF HEALTH SCIENCE, LITHUANIA

The representatives of positive psychology introduced such topics as learned optimism, positive thinking, positive attitude, building on human strengths and operating scientific methods try to determine how things for people go right (Seligman (1991, 2000), Csikszentmihalyi (2000)). The positive attitude is not a new term for the field of social work as well. The social work practitioners during their studies are taught about strengths based social work practice (Compton, 1999). The cultural context of the Lithuania has obvious features of the posttraumatic syndrome, victim roles, passive aggressiveness, self destructive behavior and learned helplessness (Gailienė, 2004; Gailienė, 2005). Social work practitioners not only work with the clients using empowering strategies, but also promote the change in the society, endorse social development. Reflection of the own approach, dominant attitudes in the society, understanding the background, questioning, giving insights and modeling by own

1 Correspondence to Lina Danusevičienė, Department of Social and Humanitarian Sciences, Faculty of Public Health, Lithuanian University of Social Science, Lithuania. E-mail: linadanus@gmail.com

example are the main tools promoting change in the persons life and in the society. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of the study which aimed to discover the factors that ensure positive attitude in the social work practice. In the study were formulated two questions: what it means for social work practitioners the term positive attitude in the social work practice and what social factors reinforce to apply it in their everyday work.

The study was designed using the qualitative research social constructivism strategy. There was applied a focus group method in order to reveal the deeper and broader view on the research topics, as the participants in the focus group inspire in the discussion each others thoughts and ideas. The focus group of six social work practitioners met for three sessions of 90 min. to discuss the topics formulated according to the questions of the study. The purposive stratified sampling: three social workers of age 25 to 30 who entered the field of social work after studies and worked from 1 to 5 years and had experience of social work practice aboard; the other three participants of the age over 45 to 55 and have been working in the field of social work for 10 to over 15 years and had no or had some contacts with foreign social work practitioners. All the social workers are providing social work services for the families and children. The study was performed from January to March of 2011.

Each meeting of the focus group had the separate task. In the first session the focus group discussed what embodies the term positive attitude for social work practitioners, supporting their thought with examples from each day practice. The second session was centered on the factors that ensure social work practitioners to apply the positive attitude in their work. The third session was used to check the relevance of the discovered themes with the focus group and to discuss the use of positive attitude in Lithuanian cultural context and how much it is acceptable and alien to it? All the focus group session were recorded. After each session the data were transcribed, coded, categorized and united into the themes.

Findings: The study revealed that the positive attitude in the social work is an ability to retain positiveness in every situation: to uncover

and name the positive aspects *"able to see what was going in the situation well"*, *"to analyze what I learned from this event or different circumstances"*; to name the strengths of the client or the situation *"notice and teach the patients to see those good things, to value those small changes, which may be hardly seen"*; positive attitude towards people *"positive attitude to yourself and to other people"*, *"openness to see a person, a human being"*. The social workers named positive attitude as a powerful tool in seeking for solutions of the problems. At the same time they emphasized that this is a technique, which they started to learn during the studies of social work, sustained by contacts with western teachers or lively experienced aboard. On the other hand they highlighted that to use this technique in the everyday social work practice requires extra efforts *"it is not natural, its has to be learned"*, *"completely unnatural technique ... by time it turns into natural ..."* It was seen as personal responsibility of professional to use it in the practice. Social workers expressed that to use positive attitude you have to be a strong person, because it means to differ, to stand out from the surrounding (*"it is hard to be stranger, because using it you are a stranger"*).

The main factors maintain the use the positive attitude in everyday social work practice: professional competence, support and feedback from colleagues, freedom and clear boundaries of responsibilities given by employer, constantly revised knowledge and skills in workshops, supervisions, presence of students.

The professional competence is composed of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Voorhees, 2001). The knowledge helps not to involve into the conflict with the client and work out a positive contact with him *"we know that the first reaction is defensive – "nothing will work". But understanding it you do not involve into the conflict with mothers. After some time slowly, slowly they go into the contact and start to collaborate..."* This quote also illustrates the work process in small steps (Weezel, 2010). The social workers in the focus group emphasized the perception of the situation, insight to the thoughts and feelings of the client, and naming them in the positive way: *"...one child always try to take all the brushes... I just said to him that it is hard to choose just*

one from such a big amount... You want all of them. He replied "yes". Then I said, "please take as much as you need, but ensure that everyone from us got a brush. He looked at me, took one and the others left". It shows that the positive reaction requires from the social worker not only knowledge but particular skills. The main of them is ability to reflect on the situation and on the client's feelings and reactions, as well on the own emotions and reactions ("reflection is important, that you could recognize, that you take too much on you"). It requires from social worker not only good skills, but as well knowledge ("In the seminar participants say we are angry, anxious... and I am happy it means group is moving forward..."). The competence for the social worker helps to obtain constructive decisions. Intervision and supervision deepen and build reflection skills and aid to find solutions "you get new ideas, you learn from each other". The positive attitude is interrelated with supportive work atmosphere, feedback from colleagues, given freedom and clear boundaries of responsibilities by employer ("... sometimes you borrow ideas from colleagues or from discussion you just refill yourself").

The positive attitude is a learned technique and mainly from the contact with western teachers, trainers: "in the workshop of Norwegians Art we were learning to transform aggression...The design of workshop was that we were allowed to give to each other only positive feedback. After it when we lead the groups, after the session the colleagues say only positive feedback... Then you feel that this practice starts to grow in. And I start to catch myself.... that I recognize, I fix positive things easier and quicker...". The special significance was given to gained professional experience abroad and possibility to keep contact with professionals from abroad. The social workers named the importance of constant revision of the professional attitude and knowledge. "At first you use it, but step by step again you are enrolled ...and step by step start to neglect it". The older social workers were more skeptical about worth of theories or workshops, learning from abroad. It might be defensive reaction. They accentuated the value of practice and that people from abroad have to learn from them, but not the other way round. All agreed that the presence of students, their practice is a good source for refreshing knowledge and attitudes ("we tell to students, that we

want not only to give, but hope to get too... they come with airy open view, they encourage move on"). It is seen as airy view and possibility to get something new.

The focus group time to time came to the topic of the obstacles for practicing positive attitude in social work. The main message was that it is difficult to use positive attitude in Lithuania. *"It is hard, when you always are surrounded with angry, sad faces, nobody smiles"; "...then you face all this negativeness, it doesn't work naturally, you need to put a lot of extra efforts, as the surrounding does not do it".* The researcher D.Gailienė (2005) connects the negative attitude, passive aggressiveness, self destructive behavior with posttraumatic syndrome and the imprint of victim role. The people in occupation were striving to survive. The survival mean to stay invisible, hide own thoughts, feelings People became accustomed to say what the person in power wants to hear. Constant modification led to the loss of own identity, neuroses.

Concluding, it can be said that social work practitioners applying positive attitude in their work have to strive with such attributes of Lithuanian cultural context as negative approach, learned helplessness and to overcome own feeling of fair to differ. The support from colleagues, intervision, supervision, workshops are the means to motivate and assist social workers to apply positive attitude and strengths based method in social work practice.

Implications and recommendations:

Social work studies should be directed towards formation of the positive attitude of the future social workers, nurture the critical thinking, ability to recognize emotions and consciously make decisions.

Reflexion (with the help of intervision or supervision), self-observation and consistent update of the knowledge and skills are the means which contribute successful implementation of positive attitude in the social work practice.

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