

**Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie
Multidimensionala**

Romanian Journal for Multidimensional Education

ISSN: 2066 – 7329 (print), ISSN: 2067 – 9270
(electronic)

Covered in: Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC,
EconPapers, Socionet, Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabell, SSRN,
Appreciative Inquiry Commons, Journalseek, Scipio,
EBSCO, CEEOL, ERIH PLUS

**IDENTITY OF SOCIAL WORKERS WORKING
WITH IMMIGRANTS WITH AN INTERNATIONAL
PROTECTION IN SLOVAKIA**

Martina ZAKOVA, Katarina LEVICKA, Dusan
LEGERSKY

Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala,
2015, Volume 7, Issue 1, June, pp. 91-104

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://revistaromaneasca.ro>

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

Identity of Social Workers Working with Immigrants with an International Protection in Slovakia

Martina ZAKOVA¹
Katarina LEVICKA²
Dusan LEGERSKY³

Abstract

Migration is an issue that concerns every country in the world. Slovakia, for a longer period of time, was a country whose people were leaving, mainly due to political persecution and lack of freedom of religion. After the change of political regime and the establishment of the Slovak Republic, that since 1993, Slovakia ranks among the countries to which inhabitants of other countries are coming and are looking for a new home, a new job or protection from persecution. In 1993 the first refugee camp was established in Slovakia and successively also other camps were opened. With the arrival of refugees to Slovakia social workers has begun to work with these clients.

This paper focuses more on the immigrants who do not come to Slovakia voluntarily, i.e. refugees. In this paper, when we write about immigrants we think with persons granted asylum and also with persons with a subsidiary protection status. The aim of the study was to explore how social workers perceive themselves as workers with immigrants with international protection. In Slovakia, social workers working with these clientele are social workers who work for one of two nongovernmental organizations. We particularly focused on their professional identity, what is formed by the profession of social work. Another part of our interest was social workers' motivation to work in this field of social work.

¹ Associated Professor, Ph.D., Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Work, Slovak Republic, martina.zakova@truni.sk, +421 33 5939 407.

² Assistant Professor, Ph.D., Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Work, Slovak Republic, katarina.levicka@truni.sk, +421 33 5939 407.

³ PhD Student, Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Work, Slovak Republic, dusan.legersky@tvu.sk, +421 33 5939 426.

Qualitative research strategy was used. Semi-structured interviews with social workers working with immigrants were conducted. All of the participants were graduated in social work, with at least a bachelor degree. Most of the Slovak social workers from this field took part in this research. The data were analyzed using the program Atlas.Ti.

Findings describe how social workers working with immigrants identify themselves, what they consider the core of their profession and how this differs from other social work fields.

This paper was prepared as a part of the project The Identity of Social Work in the Context of Slovakia [APVV-0524-12] funded by the Slovak Research and Development Agency.

Keywords:

Social work; Social workers; Slovakia; Immigrants; Identity.

Introduction

Social workers working with immigrants with an international protection overcome a lot of problems which are usually caused from misunderstanding and unwillingness or from an inability to accept immigrants as people with same rights as we are. This job is very important but very complicated. There are many problems with ensuring of accommodation to their clients, with looking for jobs for them, with looking for medical doctors who are willing to treat them and so on. This field of social work does not have a long history in Slovakia and this is a one of the reasons why we decided to focus on a professional identity.

We do not many about professional identity of social workers in Slovakia. We realized a pilot study about identity of social workers working in hospitals in Slovakia. This study showed the presence of high degree of identification of social workers with the profession and they are pride that they are social workers (Kovalcikova, Pavelek, Slana, Zakova, 2014). We wanted to know about professional identity of social workers working in an area that is not such long history as social work in hospitals is. An aim in this paper is to write about identity of these social workers working with immigrants with an international protection in Slovakia.

From a beginning we define the most important terms such as identity and professional identity, migration, migrant, immigrant, refugee and asylum seeker. Then we continue with the overview of situation in immigration in the Slovak Republic for last ten years. The last part of the article is focused to social work with immigrants with international protection and results of our research.

1. Identity and professional identity

We can find many definitions of identity. The most of them are from philosophical and some from psychological point of view. We can also find some theories about identity. One of an author a theory of identity is Erikson. According to Erikson (1999), ego identity is developed through social interaction and it is constantly changing due to new experiences and information. Stets and Burke (2000) write that the core of identity is the categorization of person him/herself in the role and integration in his/her own personality meanings and expectations connected with its role and performance. According to McCall and Simmons (1978) role identity is the character and role that individual defines for him/herself as a member of a certain social position.

Klenovsky (In Smutek, Seibel, Truhlarova, 2010) write that professional identity is a self-determination of a profession and it is only one part of identity which creates self-determination of a person. He says that achieving identity is linked with commitments. We can talk about an identity for the profession when the individual internally undertake to fulfill its claims. According to Berger and Luckmann (1999) roles that individual takes in institutions are part of individual identity. Professional identity is as awareness of one profession in the system of social categories and relationships and it can be received as individual identification with the profession through the acquisition of values, norms, theories, practices etc., or as a process of identification with socially fixed schemes (e.g. definitions, standards and requirements for the profession (Kosova, 2006).

1.1. Migrant, migration, immigrant with international protection

An international migration has involved about 3% of global population annually for the past 50 years now, although estimates of the

numbers involved continue to rise – from 175 million in 2000, to 200 million in 2009 and to 214 million in 2012 (Cox, Pavar 2012).

A person who moves across a border his or her country or who moves within national territory is a migrant (Valtonen, 2008). A migrant can be legal or illegal. A legal migrant is a person who came to Slovakia legally. An illegal migrant is a person who was apprehended for crossing the state border or staying in the territory of the Slovak Republic illegally (Statistical Overview of Legal and Illegal Migration in the Slovak Republic, 2008). A migrant can be an immigrant or emigrant. A person leaving a country to live in another country is an emigrant and a person entering a country to settle there is an immigrant. So an immigrant is a person who was born in another country as he or she lives (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Kováts with his colleagues (2006) argues that word such as immigrant is used to identify person who comes to other countries to stay there temporarily or permanently. Immigrants who left their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion we call refugees (The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). According to our law, these immigrants are asylum seekers or persons with granted asylum. Asylum is a type of international protection. Another type of international protection is a subsidiary protection status and immigrants who have this type of international protection are called persons with subsidiary protection. A subsidiary protection status can be granted when immigrants are not qualify for asylum but their return to their countries of origin may lead to serious harm. In this article we will use a term immigrants with international protection for those foreigners who are granted asylum and foreigners who are granted subsidiary protection.

This issue is not have a long history in Slovakia. We can say that the history is as old as the Slovak Republic and Slovak Republic was establish in 1993. In Slovakia, there is not a big number of immigrants. We are not a country where immigrants want to stay or about which they know.

In a next table, we show trends of asylum seekers and persons with and without subsidiary protection.

Table 1. Trends of asylum seekers and persons with and without international protection

Type of protection/ Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Asylum seekers	3549	2849	2642	909	822	541	491	732	441	331
Persons with granted asylum	25	8	14	22	14	15	12	32	15	14
Denial of asylum	827	861	1177	416	330	180	186	334	124	197
Persons with subsidiary protection	0	0	82	66	98	57	91	104	34	99
Denial of subsidiary protection	0	0	646	273	165	101	47	153	49	41

2. Process of granting asylum or subsidiary protection

In our country, an issue of migration is under control of the Migration Office. The Migration Office was established in the year 1993. The Migration Office decides about granting asylum and subsidiary protection status at the first level.

According to our law (Act 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum and Amendment of Some Acts) an international protection granting procedure shall start by an immigrant's statement at a competent police department that he/she applies for granting asylum or subsidiary protection on the territory of the Slovakia. The statement shall be recorded by the police department in an official form sent to the Migration Office without any delay. The police department shall take away the travel document of the immigrant or another identification document and shall issue a receipt on confirmation about it to the immigrant. The police department shall also ensure taking of the immigrant's fingerprint. The immigrant is going to a detention camp. An authorized employee of the Migration Office shall make an entrance interview with the immigrant. In the course of the entrance interview,

the immigrant shall be obliged to provide truthfully and fully all requested information necessary for a decision on the application for granting asylum or subsidiary protection. Prior to filling in the questionnaire, but at the latest within 15 days after starting of the procedure, the authorized employee of the Migration Office shall instruct the immigrant of his/her rights and obligations during the international protection procedure, of possible consequences of not fulfilling or violating his/her obligations under this Act, of the possibility of being represented in the procedure under this Act and of access to a legal aid. The Migration Office shall also provide the immigrant with information about non-governmental organizations focusing on the care of immigrants. If possible, the instructions and information shall be provided in writing and in a language which the immigrant understand. The authorized officer of the Migration Office shall interview the immigrant. After the interview, immigrants should wait for decision. If the immigrant does not grant asylum or subsidiary protection a remedy can be filed with a court.

During whole asylum or subsidiary protection procedure immigrants have a possibility to meet social workers or other professionals. In Slovakia, we have social workers working with these clientele who work for the Migration Office and also social workers who work for nongovernmental organizations (next NGOs).

3. Social work with immigrants with international protection

According to Potocky-Tripodi (2002) social work with immigrants with international protection requires specialized knowledge of the unique issues of this population. It also requires specialized adaptations and applications of mainstream services and interventions. Kuric (1997) defines social work with immigrants as a relatively broad complex of targeted activities that are aimed at finding a lasting solution to the situation of individuals, families and an immigrant community as a whole, that is, in particular, their adaptation and optionally inclusion into a new society. In addition, social work also includes help, support and finding solutions to immigrants with international protection procedure.

According to Hayes and Humphries (2008) the role of social workers would be an advocate and negotiator. They can better access services and support the immigrants with international protection

through process. Immigrants are under great pressure during waiting for an international protection and feel suspicious of people in institutions. Without social worker interventions, many of them would not access supports they need.

4. Methodology

Aim of the study was to explore how social workers perceive themselves as workers with immigrants with an international protection. We particularly focused on whether their professional identity. Another part of our interest was social workers' motivation to work in this field of social work. Therefore we were looking for answers for several particular research questions:

- What motivates social workers with immigrants to do their job?
- What is perceived as the most important part of the job of social workers with immigrants?
- Which values are important for the social workers with immigrants?

3.1. Participants

In Slovakia, social workers from NGOs are those who work with immigrants with an international protection mainly. So we decided to do interviews only with them. Currently, in Slovakia, there are two NGOs which work with these clientele – Marginal (a civic association) and Caritas Slovakia (Religious charitable organization). 9 social workers work for these two organizations. We interviewed 7 social workers from both organizations. No other special criteria had to be met to participate in the study. Table 1 shows basic information about the social workers.

Table 2 Participants demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Organization where currently employed	Length of streetwork experiences
Migrant worker 1	Female	26	MARGINAL	2 years and 4 months
Migrant worker 2	Female	29	MARGINAL	3 years and 6 months

Migrant worker 3	Female	31	MARGINAL	2 years
Migrant worker 4	Male	33	MARGINAL	5 years
Migrant worker 5	Female	24	MARGINAL	9 months
Migrant worker 6	Female	29	CARTAS SLOVAKIA	7 months
Migrant worker 7	Male	29	Detention center for foreigners	3 years

3.2. Procedure

A semi-structured interview scheme was designed to obtain information about experiences with the work of social worker working with immigrants. Open-ended questions focused on how this specific work experience is perceived, what the values and what social work means to them were raised.

Interviews with social workers working with immigrants who agreed to participate in the study were conducted in offices of the organization in which they are employed. Interviews last approximately for one hour. All interviews were taped and then transcribed. Open coding (Strauss, Corbinová, 1999) was used to code data, all coding was done in the software Atlas.Ti. Coding was checked by another researcher to check the accuracy of coding.

4. Results

Presented study is a part of a large national research aimed at the identity of social work in the context of Slovakia. Therefore we present only partial results. Findings are described as answers to the research questions.

4.1. I've got a job!

Among our participants usually there was a rare previous knowledge about work with immigrants, only two of them had specific subjects during their university studies focused on social work with migrants. We can conclude that only one of our participant was intentionally seeking a job in this field. The rest of participants considered a job offer of a social worker with immigrants interesting, they applied for this offer and that way became a social worker working with migrants.

„...for me it was a coincidence that I signed up for the job. Hmm it was a social worker position ...and actually I was chosen.“ (Social worker 2)

For this participant it was not important to get a job in a concrete organization or to work with any special clientele, she was just trying to get any job.

What we found interesting is the fact that nearly all of the participants lived for some time in a foreign country. Some of them even had previous experiences with immigrants from that times, and they perceived this experiences as significant in shaping their motivation to work with immigrants.

“To be honest, I did not get to this work purposefully. Even during my studies I did not have any subject relating to refugees, or asylum seekers. Well, I did not know much about this topic. Later on, I worked in England with foreigners from India, England and other countries. And when I returned, I got an opportunity to get this job.” (Social worker 4)

We can assume that social work with migrants is still of a marginal interest. We have a lack of specialist who could prepare students for this job. Awareness about this topic and opportunities in this field is still quite low. Therefore students and social workers only exceptionally are looking for a job in this area.

4.2. Social counselling and social assistance

As an essential part of their job the participants of our study perceived social counselling and social assistance. Assistance and counselling are needed in various areas, because their clients daily need to be helped in officies, at the doctors, when arranging living, school, work, etc.

„ ... social assistance and social counseling, as there may be someone who is otherwise able for example to get to the doctor, but he doesn't know the city, doesn't know where the doctor is, he do not speak the language, has no idea how it works in this country, he is not familiar with the ordering system at the doctors, doesn't know which documents he should bring with himself. So social counseling and assistance are for me the most important.” (Social worker 2)

Participants were emphasizing that these both form of help have to be aimed at strengthening the independence of clients.

„...from the practical point of view, there may be more such assistance for the foreigners in the beginning, but then it's also just a counselling. Then we try to „disconnect“ them so they are able to function by themselves and independently. So we are trying to keep them mainly in ambulant form and less in the terrain form of assistance.“ (Social worker 1)

Although it is crucial to assist the client and help him/her with everyday problems, it is essential to not increase dependency of the client.

As other important task was perceived overcoming the language barrier. When the immigrant does not speak the Slovak language it is making everything more complicated. Although translation is not considered to be an official part of the job of a social worker, it was described as necessary to help the client with the communication.

„On the client side, at the beginning, is the classical barrier – language barrier. Thus, we can't communicate, someone is unable to communicate in English, then there is a misunderstanding. Actually, that's the reason why this work is difficult and needs to be repeated over and over again. And we are explaining everything repeatedly. Language, but it is obvious when working with migrants. Then the cultural, cultural differences.. .“

Just to be able to communicate is not enough. There is also need to understand the culture differences and to explain those differences to the immigrants.

“The most important is to motivate clients to learn the Slovak language, well, it's one of the most difficult tasks. Also important is understanding the client, at least basic knowledge of the customs of their culture.”(Social worker 6)

Therefore knowing and understanding the cultural background of the immigrant is considered essential part of the job of a social worker working with immigrants.

4.3. Stand up for their rights

As most important values were seen the values of justice, freedom and tolerance. Participants perceived is as necessary to fight for the rights of their clients, because some of their basic rights might be violated. Often they the clients are often facing racism and prejudices, mainly when trying to manage accommodation, medical treatments, work, papers, etc. Another problematic area are bureaucratic obstacles due to which some of the rights might be violated as well.

„Or, as regards the police actually, foreign police, it is also one of the basic tasks, requesting documents. It happened to us so many times. The police refused to issue papers to our clients because they had not extended additional protection and so on. And while the law clearly provides that also without extensions they are obliged to issue them. So we are still haggling in this way with someone and explaining it all.“
(Social worker 3)

In case of bureaucratic obstacles violation of rights of the immigrants is not intentional. Nevertheless, participants perceived is as problem area in which their help is needed.

Besides these obstacles, participants were talking about various issues which they considered contradictory to making this job for a long period of time. Low salary, uncertainty in continuing the projects are seen as a barrier to start a family. Moreover, stress and emotional pressure related to this job are experienced as uncomfortable

„I was thinking about it [doing this job for the rest of life] , but on the one hand, I can't imagine that by 50 I'd be doing what I'm doing here. Until recently, I thought that I could cope with stress and frustration and conflicts at work, since I have to deal with foreigners. But actually, the street has its impact on me and I can't imagine that I would maintain this position for a long time.“ (Social worker 4)

5. Conclusion

Social work with immigrants in the conditions of Slovakia is still quite new and underdeveloped field of social work. During their studies the students usually are not undertaking any specific course focused on work with immigrants. Thus, there is no surprise that the social workers in this area did not choose their actual job on purpose. It was not a

“dream job” which they were specially looking for, but rather they responded to a job offer.

As one of the most important task of social work with immigrants was described social assistance and social counseling. Accompanying the client to doctors, police station, offices, helping him or her to arrange living is seen as essential.

Within the professional values the one of the highest importance was found justice. This values was connected to the fact that social workers have to fight for their clients and to help them overcome prejudice and racism, help them when there are actual or potential violation of their rights. This is consistent to the advocating and negotiating role of social workers working with immigrants as described by Hayes and Humphries (2008).

Although the job of a social worker working with immigrants is considered interesting there are various barriers, for which participants do not want to undertake this work in the long term. One of the most serious barrier is the fact that organization providing services for immigrants and their employees are paid within projects. Continuation of these projects in the future and thus the question of a potential work are uncertain. In addition, the salary in this work field is considerably low. Moreover, social workers in this position are experiencing a great amount of stress, which too is making this job not a lifetime possibility.

We would like to point out that it is necessary to focus more on laws, policies which could be more supporting the immigrants. In addition, better cooperation of organizations is needed, so the rights of immigrants won't be violated just for some bureaucratic obstacles. Therefore, more adequate administrative guidelines should be elaborated in order to know how to proceed e.g. in case of issuing documents for the immigrants.

As other problematic area was seen the language competencies of employees at departments and offices operating in asylum areas. These competencies should be strengthened so many administrative procedures would be easier.

We can conclude that there still is a lack of social workers in this specific field and there should be created more job positions for them. But it is also important to focus also on the social workers currently working in this sphere, particularly on implementing stress prevention

programs for workers with immigrants which could reduce stress experienced in their work.

References

- Act 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum and Amendment of Some Acts)
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1999). *Socialni konstrukce reality*. Brno: Centrum pro stadium demokracie a kultury.
- Cox, D., & Pawar, M. (2012). *International Social Work. Issues, Strategies, and Programs* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Erikson, E. H. (1999). *Zivotni cyklus rozšíreny a dokončeny*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.
- Hayes, D., & Humphries, B. (eds) (2008). *Social Work, Immigration and Asylum. Debates, Dilemmas and Ethical Issues for Social Work and Social Care Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Klenovsky, L. (2010). Identita profese jakozto identita profesionalu. In M. Smutek, F. W. Seibel & Z. Truhlarova (Eds.), *Rizika socialni prace* (pp. 224-229). Hradec Kralove: Gaudeamus.
- Kovalcikova, N., Pavelek, L., Slana, M., & Zakova, M. (2014). Professional Identity Perception of Hospital Social Workers in Slovakia. In *ERIS Web Journals*, 5, 15 - 24
- Kosova, B. (2006). Profesia a profesionalita ucitela v teoretických súvislostiach. In B. Kasacova et al. (Eds.), *Profesijny rozvoj ucitela* (pp. 8-20). Presov: Metodicko-pedagogicke centrum.
- Kovats, A. et al. (2007). *Prakticka socialna praca s utevcami – pristup cez ludske prava*. Budapest: Menedek
- Kuric, A. (1997). *Uprchlici a socialni prace*. Brno: SOZE.
- McCall, G. J. & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and interactions*. New York: Free Press.
- Potocky – Tripodi, M. (2002). *Best practices for social work with refugees and immigrants*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stets, J. E. & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63, 224 - 237.
- Strauss, A. & Corbinová, J. (1999). *Zákady kvalitativního výskumu*. Boskovice: Albert, 1999. 196 s.
- Valtonen, K. (2008). *Social work and migration: immigrant and refugee settlement and integration*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Biodata



Slovakia.

Martina ZAKOVA works as an associated professor at the Department of Social Work of the Trnava University in Trnava. She is particularly interested in social work with asylum seekers, ethnic and cultural diversity, drug addiction and harm reduction. She is involved in the research project The Identity of Social Work in the Context of



the Context of Slovakia, responsible for qualitative research phase.

Katarina LEVICKA works as an assistant professor at the Department of Social Work of the Trnava University in Trnava. She is particularly interested in social work ethics, professional development of social work students, family studies and research in social work. As young researcher she is involved in the research project The Identity of Social Work in



the observance of human rights and lecturing activity within this field. He is also a member of the research team The Identity of Social Work in the Context of Slovakia.

Dusan LEGERSKY is a doctoral student at the Department of Social Work of the Trnava University in Trnava. He specializes in the field of human rights and the psychological manipulation used by destructive groups. He acts as a chairman of the civil association One Blood, which deals with the