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Identity of Street Workers Working with Drug Users and Sexworkers in Slovakia

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Identity of Street Workers Working with Drug Users and Sexworkers in Slovakia

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Abstract

Harm reduction refers to policies, programs and practices that aim to reduce harms associated with drugs using. Harm reduction activities are focusing on the prevention of harm, rather than on the prevention of drug use itself. It is an approach that falls under the field of public health, professionals working in this field in Slovakia, however, are mainly students or graduates of social work. Social workers work with the clients in their natural environment - on the street. Street workers work with drug users and often with people working in the sex business, so with clients who are marginalized. It is a difficult job, which in the general population often has a negative connotation.

The aim of the study was to explore how social workers perceive themselves as harm reduction workers. We particularly focused on whether their professional identity is formed by the profession of social work or rather by the harm reduction philosophy. Another part of our interest was social workers' motivation to work in this field of social work.

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

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

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Introduction

A work with clients who use drugs and work in sex-business is very difficult. They are a clientele who are marginalized and many people do not like them and do not want to help them, they think that they are lost people. In 2006, Agency FOCUS realized research as a part of Action plan to prevent all forms of discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance. Research was realized by asking questions about the acceptability of „others” in the neighbourhood. The most negative responses received drug depended people (83%), then Roma people (72,8%), right-wing extremists (62%), people with a criminal record (58,8%), Muslims (49,5%), homosexuals (38,8%) a immigrants (35,2%) (Záverečná správa projektu Reprezentatívny výskum 2007).

The aim of the study was to explore how social workers perceive themselves as harm reduction workers. We particularly focused on whether their professional identity is formed by the profession of social work or rather by the harm reduction philosophy. Another part of our interest was social workers' motivation to work in this field of social work.

1. Harm reduction

Field work with clients who use drugs and/or work in street sex business uses access called harm reduction. Harm reduction is “a part of the mainstream policy response to drug use in Europe (Rhode & Hedrich, 2010, p. 13)”. International Harm Reduction Association defines harm reduction as: „... *policies, programmes and practices that aim primarily to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of the use of legal and illegal psychoactive drugs without necessarily reducing drug consumption.*” (What is harm reduction?, www.ihra.net). In its scope, it focuses on people who use drugs but are unable or unwilling to stop their use (www.ihra.net). These policies and programmes based on predefined principles which form the backbone of this approach. Harm reduction manages principles, such as pragmatism, humanistic values, focus on damage and reducing, balancing costs and

benefits (egg. a broader meaning for the community and society) and immediate priority (most realistic) goals (Beirness et al., 2008).

“Despite differences in opinion and experience, there is a general consensus that abstinence-orientated drug policies need to be supplemented by measures that can demonstrably reduce the harms that drug users are exposed to. This consensus is strongest in the area of reducing HIV infection among injectors — although even here there is disagreement on the appropriateness of which interventions might fall under this general heading (Rhodes & Hedrich, 2010, p. 14).”

Despite the fact that harm reduction approach is mainly oriented to minimize harms associated with drug use, this approach can be used in many areas of social services, such as a work with people living on the street, with people working in a sex business, with hooligans and others. Kuchárová (In: Mátel, Schavel, et al., 2011) says that different groups of clients overlap among themselves. She mentions a woman - drug user working in sex-business and pregnant. According to us, the risks are multiplied in this way. Therefore, an important concern of harm reduction services is just quick response to customers’ needs and understand the context in which they live.

A needle exchange program is an essential part of harm reduction programmes for drug users. According to Hunt (2003), harm reduction approach arose in response to the global crisis of infectious HIV infection among drug users. It spread of blood-borne diseases such as HIV (in the 80s), or hepatitis (in the 70s of the 20th century), to accelerate the introduction of needle exchange programmes. In addition to the distribution of medical supplies such programmes strengthen their influence through contacts with users by following ways:

- communicate with users and provide them with information, such as how to disinfect used needles and syringes by the best way;
- allow easier access to treatment facilities, health and social services and
- using the method of the fieldwork to make contact with hidden populations (WHO, In: Hunt, 2003, p. 18).

The first needle exchange programme in Slovakia was established in 1994 at the Centre for Treatment of Drug Addiction in Bratislava (NMCD, 2008). The other needle exchange programs established in other towns in Slovakia subsequently, we had 7 organisations provided this type of services in 10 towns. At the end of 2006, one of them ended. It was a special programme – peer needle exchange program in the town Puchov. New

outreach programs opened in Trnava, Banska Bystrica, and Kosice and after a 2 years break in Zvolen (Púčiková & Vavrinčíková, 2014). In 2011, 5 NGOs provided HR services in 9 programmes in 6 towns in Slovakia. At the same time, the number of registered clients in Harm Reduction programs reach 2305 problem drug users. (NMCD, 2013) In the time of our research a situation was a little bit changed, 4 NGOs provided harm reduction services in 5 towns.

In Slovak conditions, harm reduction programmes focus primarily on outreach services (i.e. streetwork) dedicated to drug users, but with significant penetration of the target group of people working in street sex-business. Due to the double risk that these persons are exposed, condom distribution is a common part of many of needle exchange programmes (Hunt, 2003).

1.1. Work of streetworker in an area of harm reduction

One form of field social work is streetwork. According to Bednářová and Pelech (2003) streetwork is part of a contact work, which a complex of low-threshold services forms. The authors understand it as an active searching, supporting and mobile social work that offers low-threshold social assistance, which is oriented to groups at risk where a presumption is that they need a social assistance, but they do not seek it. These potential clients are contacted at a certain time and place where they common are. Matoušek (2001) states that the advantage of these forms is the greatest possible flexibility and availability to clients.

Direct work of streetworker with client takes the form of infantry, mobile or stationary streetwork and through contact centres so-called K-centres (Kuchárová In: Mátel, Schavel, et al. 2011). Streetworker is the worker who, according to Rhodes (Kuchárová In: Mátel, Schavel et al. 2011) works in the terrain while he is trying to change a client behaviour. It does it directly (i.e., through education, awareness and prevention in the community), or indirectly (by distribution clients, i.e. that he advises clients to other existing institutional or residential services that provide services beyond street work). The street worker also co-operates with other institutions in the community.

Anyone cannot become field workers, i.e. street workers. In view of the profession in the Slovak Republic the street workers are primarily people with an education in one of the helping professions or students of these professions. The building of the team from people with different

professional focus may be beneficial for clients. There are certain requirements for such kind of job. According to Rhodes (In: Hrdina & Korčíšová 2003) a strong emphasis is on personal qualities of workers in field programs. Communication skills, ability to creative thinking and unconventional negotiations are more important than formal education, at least from the beginning. Communication skills, trust, respect and credibility and understanding of the problems associated with drug use are the main criteria in choosing employees. Rhodes (In: Staníček & Hrdina, 2002) highlights the following steps those are helpful for street workers in maintaining contact with clients on the street:

- want to listen;
- want to help;
- adoption/acceptance but not agreement;
- confidence in the ability of another to cope with his feelings;
- know that feelings are fleeting;
- see the client as a person who is separated from us (Staníček & Hrdina, 2002 In: Klima et al. In: Kontaktní práce, 2008. p. 230).

2. Professional identity of social worker – streetworker

Identity is a concept which has several meanings. This may be an individual experience of continuity in time (it is called personal identity, i.e. identity with yourself), or identification with someone else with a group (terms of social identity), idea or value. "So identity is internal compliance (consistency) with external manifestations of person, so their authenticity (credibility), the consistency of his personality (internal organization, nature) and his person (his public speaking, his role) (Nakonečný 2009, S.123)." Author adds that person can be in itself behaviour more or less authentic, but his behaviour does not always reflect his true attitudes (Nakonečný, 2009).

Professional identity is then what by Adams (2006) can be described as attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills that are shared with others within the professional group, and is subject to the professional role drafted individual. So it is a question of subjective self-perception associated with the adoption of the work role. It can be described as attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills that are shared with others within the professional group, and is subject to the professional role drafted individual. So it is a question of subjective self-perception associated with the adoption of the work role.

True professionals, according to Fischer (2011), those who have a firm foothold in the disciplinary identity of social work as a science, and do not take themselves by the practice of superficial interest in the client or employer, but with high involvement. Confident ability to work in multi-professional fields of work is part of the professional identity of social work. Social workers know what to do, and they know what makes them unique. It also means that they know what they can do better than others, and they know what the cooperative can help. "Identified person with work means the internal identification with work. It can be assumed that he easier identifies with the work that he is close to that which it exercises like and that gives him satisfaction. It is generally believed that the identification of a person with a positive effect on the work of the work behaviour that affects the motivation to work, the working of the above and power "(Kocianová, 2012).

However, the process of building a professional identity has its place outside the sphere of education and the acquisition of knowledge in the field of social work. Getting professional identity of social work involves increasing self-confidence along with a growing identification with the role of the social worker and the values and ethics of the profession of social work; the process of moving from "welfare" to "knowledge" (Platt, 1992, In: Carpenter & Platt, 1997). When we focus on Slovakia, Levická (2007) in this regard express straightforward, she considers that the professional identity of the social worker consists from personal and professional equipment. It equips him to make his work the best and the most professional. If a social worker would like to practice his profession and help his clients he must have the professional competencies acquired through various forms of education, but also the personality complex equipment.

3. Methodology

Aim of the study was to explore how social workers perceive themselves as harm reduction workers. We particularly focused on whether their professional identity is formed by the profession of social work or rather by the harm reduction philosophy. 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 streetworkers to do their job?
- What is perceived as the most important part of the job of streetwork?

- Which values are important for the streetworkers?
- How do the streetworkers view the harm reduction philosophy?

3.1. Participants

All NGOs in Slovakia working with drug users and sex workers were informed about the study either by e-mail or telephone. We were interested only in streetworkers with social work education (first, second or third level of education in social work or at least a current student of social work). Currently, in Slovakia there are 4 NGOs with 31 streetworkers out of which 16 are educated in social work. In our study we interviewed 11 of these streetworkers. Out of the 11 streetworkers who participated in our study, 6 of them work in NGO STORM, 3 work in PRIMA, 1 work in ODYSEUS and 1 work for HELPING HAND. All participants are working directly as streetworkers with drug users and/or sex workers ranging from 3 months to 8,5 years. Although we have interviewed also some participants who are currently working as managers, all of the participants are still in a direct contact with clients. No other special criteria had to be met to participate in the study. Table 1 shows basic information about the streetworkers.

3.2. Procedure

A semi-structured interview scheme was designed to obtain information about experiences with the work of streetworker. Open-ended questions focused on how this specific work experience is perceived, what the values of streetworkers are, how they perceive the harm reduction philosophy and what social work means to them were raised. 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.

Interviews with streetworkers who agreed to participate in the study were conducted either in offices of the organization in which the streetworkers are employed or in the offices of researchers, depending on the time possibilities of each part.

Table 1 Participants demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Organization where currently employed	Current position in the organization	Lenght of streetwork experiences
Streetworker 1	Female	23	STORM	Streetworker	5 years
Streetworker 2	Female	25	STORM	Streetworker	7 months
Streetworker 3	Female	27	STORM	Project coordinator / manager	7 years
Streetworker 4	Female	24	PRIMA	Streetworker	3 years and 9 months
Streetworker 5	Female	24	HELPING HAND	Streetworker	5 years
Streetworker 6	Female	29	STORM	Project coordinator	7 years
Streetworker 7	Male	32	PRIMA	Project coordinator	8 years and 6 moths
Streetworker 8	Female	26	PRIMA	Streetworker	5 years
Streetworker 9	Male	37	ODYSEUS	Project coordinator	1 year
Streetworker 10	Male	28	STORM	Manager	5 years
Streetworker 11	Female	25	STORM	Streetworker	3 years

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. Nontraditional helper

Among participants in our study previous personal experience with a drug user as a motivation to start the job of streetworker was found. Several of them reported that they had close friends or relatives who were drug users. The participants motivated by their will to help their close persons decided to study social work with the focus on streetwork.

“... a friend of mine, I wanted to help her and I did not know how, so then I started to be interested about it as if I could help her and thus I came to social work. Because she had, she was a drug addict.” (Streetworker 2)

Decision to start study social work or to start the job of a streetwork was conected with a desire to get more information about drug addiction, particularly information about professional possibilities how to help drug users.

This prosocial motive was not the only one described by the participants. They were also interested in doing something not traditional.

„For me it was mainly in the fact that the work was something different, essentially less traditional and it also connected for me the usefulness with pleasure, in that it was the practical and at the same time I could put the theories that I learned in school into practice.“ (Streetworker 2)

We may say that in this manner the job of a streetworker is often seen as interesting in a specific way of not being ordinary.

4.2. To be here for the client...and the projects

The direct contact with the client was perceived as the most important part of the streetworker's job. And the aim of this direct contact is not to persuade the client to change his/her behaviour, lifestyle or anything else, but as a way how to stay in touch with clients. Direct contact therefore is sometimes meant as simple conversation or just as to be here for the client.

„They [clients] come just to get some information or just for the tea to chat with us. Because some clients – they do not have any other possibilities, they are those loners and they see something in us, that, they can rely on us. Twice a week or several times we meet together and we have a conversation, without prejudice. They do not perceive that „I am a junkie, I live on the street, or I am doing what I am doing“. Only the human contact, actually. I see it as the most important part, the contact with the client.“ (Streetworker 2)

In this way, contact is seen as a possibility how to provide the client with an experience of humanity and the sense of normality.

„...and to be a human support for him. Be there just for him. That I chat with him and make him feel save and give him the feeling that he is not a rag for me. That he is the same person as I am. Just to give him this feeling. And to give it to him within anything that I am doing.“ (Streetworker 8)

All of the organizations providing streetwork in Slovakia are NGOs. They must prepare several projects in order to gain money for providing the services, for salaries, and the whole operation. Therefore preparing projects is becoming one of the most important tasks.

„I would like to say that the most important is the direct work with clients, but despite the fact that I see it as very important, I think that in recent years sourcing some finance has been coming to the fore. Which, in my opinion,

makes the social work more difficult and that social worker cannot do his or her job only, but must also do other things...“ (Streetworker 3)

Those participants who were working also as managers or project coordinators mentioned overwhelming work around project proposals which is slowly pushing the direct work with client in the background. The reason why it is crucial to focus on those project is to have enough money to run the organizations. Otherwise, the lack of finance is perceived as a major barrier causing serious problems as:

- inability to provide services needed
- inability to build a contact center
- inability to pay workers enough – what leads to high staff turnover.

„... financing is a problem. It is discontinuous and uncertain. And due to the fact that it is this way, we often have people who work for us during their studies, and then there is staff turnover. And thus the people who work for us – it's that you somehow educate them, they are working with the client and may in fact be really good. But after school you cannot pay them, so they leave.“ (Streetworker 3)

Small amount of fund available does not allow the organizations to pay their employees well. That results in unattractiveness of this kind of a job among adult population.

„I can imagine it (working for the organisation in the future), but I do not know how long I'd be able to work only for this organisation. But how? I would not earn for my living. It is that I could not do this job because I would have failed to comply with any material things. I could not simply ensure normal functioning.“ (Streetworker 6)

Low salary is a barrier to start independent living, to start a family. Only two of all participants (both of them male) have families. Those participants have several jobs to financially provide their families. In fact, most of the participants have other part time job because it is not possible to live from the money they earn in the organization.

4.3. The value of acceptance

Within personal values, the most important one is the value of family. All of our participants were mentioning that they either would like to start a family or that their family is the most important thing to them. But we were mostly interested in professional values, or the values they recognized in connection to their job.

Acceptance was identified as the most important professional value of the participants. It was perceived as an essential part of the direct contact and of the approach to clients. Acceptance was viewed in two directions. On one hand the participants talked about accepting client's decision to take drugs or to prostitute and to have the life he/she has.

„Despite the fact that I see that there often is absolutely no progress. So with this clientele I have it somehow settled that I somehow do not mind. Actually, I take it as their decision.“ (Streetworker 7)

Acceptance does not mean to approve what the client is doing, especially not how the client is doing it. Therefore it allows the streetworkers to focus on how to make this risky behaviour less risky for the client and also for the society.

“I've realized that it is also like that I will not go after them, that 'Do not take drugs otherwise you'll die!'. But do what you do, I do accept your decision and when you do it, do it at least a little safer...” (Streetworker 2)

On the other hand, acceptance was described as something the client have to be provided with.

“just be there with him, either in silence or whatever ...not tolerance but regard – that it is most important to them...” (Streetworker 4).

In this sense the acceptance is also connected with equivalence between the streetworker and the client and could be seen as a form of unconditional regard.

4.4. Harm reduction philosophy

Streetworkers in our study viewed the harm reduction philosophy as allowing them accept, respect and understand the client the way he or she is, as a human being.

„And for me it's good in that harm reduction respects these people. That they are not deteriorated in any way, but that they are perceived as some people at the same level. And when they have decided to live this life, so OK. "So live it at least in a less risky manner. That, for themselves and for their surroundings. "And what I like about the HR is also the partnership approach to clients.“ (Streetworker 8)

Thus, harm reduction philosophy can help the streetworkers to focus themselves on the problem of the client in a more respectful way. At the same time they considered harm reduction philosophy as enriching, because they now see it as an important part of their lives.

“It [harm reduction philosophy] is really close to me and I think it will be. I do sympathize with this philosophy a lot and I say that this is not only an approach that can only be used in this target group, but it is an approach that can be used also globally, in ordinary relationships in your life and also can be applied to the life and that ... and that I am fine living with harm reduction.”
(Streetworker 8)

Harm reduction can not only help in the direct streetwork with the client, but as an approach to life is also helpful in everyday situations.

5. Conclusion

As the most important part of the overall job of a streetworker the direct contact with client was mentioned by all participants of our study. Although it does not have to be an intervention or systematic work on the client's problem, it is viewed as essential.

What we see as a upsetting is the fact that streetworkers working also as managers and project coordinators were saying that they are overwhelmed and overloaded with project proposals. We would like to point out to the alarming reality that this mainly administrative work around project is slowly but surely starting to overshadow the direct contact with clients. This should be discussed on a more political level, where cities, municipalities and even the state should consider the way of financing such services.

Getting back to the direct work with client, it should be performed with acceptance. This values was mentioned by all participants as either a way how to respect client's decision to take drugs or to prostitute. In this sense acceptance is connected on focusing the clients to minimize the risk of their behaviour and to show them and support them in practising more safe options of taking drugs or prostituting. Acceptance was also viewed as simply being here with the client and for the client, even though the streetworker does not have to do or even say anything. Stay with the clients and regard them the way they are, as a human being. This could be also seen in the connection with harm reduction philosophy.

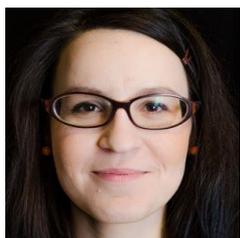
The harm reduction philosophy is perceived as vital for the job of streetworkers. It allows them to accept the client as he/she is, to respect his/her individuality. Moreover, it was described as very useful toll in everyday life situation, where it can help solve interpersonal conflicts or simply allows accept the diversity of opinions.

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Biodata



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