NEED FOR MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract. Competencies of the social worker are the key factor that helps to respond appropriately to the occurring changes and adapt. Regulation of social work, cultural and mental environment differ, affecting the needs of the population and work practice. With this research, we aim to reveal the need for managerial competencies in the practice of social work. The qualitative research was applied. Managerial competencies enable the social workers to attain more effective results at work; however, when working with different groups of service recipients, priorities of competencies and abilities differ.

Keywords: managerial competencies, social work, care services

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INTRODUCTION

Social work as an occupation functions under constantly changing economic, social, political and cultural conditions. This results in emergence of new work methods, new customer groups, or change of the needs of the existing customer groups. Competencies of the social worker is the key factor helping respond appropriately to the occurring changes and adapt. As a multifunctional and multidimensional activity by its nature, creating the preconditions for application of knowledge of different fields of research, social work encourages to employ new approaches, acknowledge and understand the changes in the functioning of the subject of the profession (Eidukevičiūtė et. al., 2014).

Over the last few years, the contents and scope of social work in Lithuania changed substantially. Social employees deal with the situation and problem assessment and are included in a multitude of social planning activities; they also implement social programmes (Adomaitienė et. al., 2017), lead the team, students, and volunteers and have to ensure effective use of resources (Bagdonaitė–Stelmokienė et al., 2014). The growing complexity of activities implies that the number of decisions made at the level of specialists is increasing, thus enhancing the need for managerial competencies of social workers (Adomaitienė et. al., 2017).

Competencies of social workers are among the interests of researchers; however, more recent studies by Lithuanian researchers are lacking. Petkevičiūtė et. al., (2003) studied the trends of managerial competence expression among the executives of social service establishments; Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė et al. (2014) explored the development of managerial competencies in social work studies; Adomaitienė et. al., (2017) investigated the competencies of individuals working in social service sector and possibilities for their improvement, whereas Kavaliauskienė et al., (2022) examined the expression of competencies of prospective social workers in the reflections of professional activity practices. More recently, Kavaliauskienė et. al., (2022) noted that Lithuanian researchers have analysed the prestige of the social work profession and motivation of students to study social work, importance of supervision in social work practice, and significance of supervision for the acquisition of reflection skills, and explored the experiences of students in practice. Researchers of foreign countries have accumulated a greater volume of papers pertaining to social worker competencies. Karpetis (2017) conducted a narrative study and summarised the skills of social workers, Mettilda et. al., (2019) scrutinised the professional competencies of social work students, while Petrů et. al., (2023) analysed the competencies required for the executives of social service institutions.

It is important to emphasise that research findings revealed by foreign researchers are inherent to individual countries, as social work systems vary from one country to another. Regulation of social work, cultural and mental environment differ, affecting the needs of the population and work practice.

It is noteworthy that the focus of researchers on managerial competencies in social work practice in Lithuania remains limited and does not disclose the social worker's professional reality. Analysis of managerial competencies enables determining the competence elements crucial in social work practice and identifying the ones that should be focused on in the training process. The latter factor is particularly significant when raising the question concerning the social worker specialisation and enhancing their ability to work with different groups of service recipients.

The most pressing social work quality issues in Lithuania nowadays call for deeper insights into the sources of effective functioning of social work in order to be able to acknowledge and understand them and to assess the need for managerial competencies. This paper aims at revealing the need for managerial competencies in the practice of social work.

EXPRESSION OF MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES OF SOCIAL WORKERS WHEN DEALING WITH DIFFERENT GROUPS OF SERVICE RECIPIENTS

In social work, the need for specific competencies is not static, whereas the prioritisation of abilities can be determined by situations and environment, as shown by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, flows of migrants fleeing the threat of war, and difficulties caused by yet-unknown intercultural differences. Those working in the social domain have encountered all of those directly.

Exceptionally turbulent environment, uncertain situations, and transformation of relations with the service recipients strengthened the need for managerial competencies in social work practice. Managerial competencies in social work allow for better understanding of the approaches to effective use of resources, promote social innovations and leadership. Lara et al., (2019) suggested that managerial competencies could be defined as personal qualities that have a causal relationship with the effective performance of work.

A professional social worker leverages managerial competencies in the fields of empowerment, development or integration of individuals as well as in the governance activities whose success depends on the knowledge of effective management principles. For example, social work organisers and social workers coordinate the work of individual care specialists and also help new employees socialise by performing the mentor's function (Coulshed et al., 2018).

Interaction with people while helping others attain their goals, supervising their efforts and consulting with various sources before making the decisions, problem solving, presentation and management of the change process – these are the tasks common both to a social worker and a manager. Manager's skills could be adapted while deploying certain social work intervention methods and approaches. Furthermore, social workers at all levels, similar to the managers, observe the required standards while managing the resources (Coulshed et al., 2018).

In research papers on the topic of social worker competencies, much attention is paid to effective planning (Brahim et al., (2015); Kavaliauskienė et. al., 2022). Effective planning is significant when planning multi-agency interventions. An intervention plan applied in case management requires a multisectoral eclecticism of several parties, such as police, educational and health care institutions. Adomaitienė et. al., (2017) and Berger et al. (2020) noted that planning in social work encompassed various technical abilities: assessment, data analysis, development and evaluation of an optimal community future scenario. Here, planning includes all actions, starting with the acknowledgment of problems to action taking when solving them.

Bagdonaitė–Stelmokienė et al., (2014) carried out a study of the development of managerial competencies in social work studies and found that the following areas of managerial competencies were important in social work: *public relations competencies, leadership competencies, competencies in the field of economy, performance quality guarantee, intercultural competencies, and interpersonal competencies.* According to the authors, public relations competencies are revealed when representing an organisation and its values, drawing attention to the organisation's programmes and activities, attracting volunteers, and fostering the cooperation and strategic relations. Leadership competencies are important for motivating, leading and supporting the co-workers, students, and volunteers, for evaluating, analysing and improving teamwork, analysing the workload and distributing the tasks within the team appropriately. Competencies in the field of economy reveal the ability to perform work functions cost-efficiently. Performance quality guarantee is perceived as the "attention to quality (ability to assess and maintain the performance quality)" (Bagdonaitė–Stelmokienė et al., 2014). This competence is characterised by the abilities of the social employee to plan their activities and follow the guidelines of their work, to collect independently information about legal and political conditions pertaining to any domain of social work and to analyse this information as well as to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. Intercultural competencies are defined by the ability to recognise and understand intercultural differences (value, lifestyle), to apply legal and social knowledge of social work in solving migration, racism, and discrimination problems, to apply suitable methods when working with clients and colleagues from other cultures to ensure effective and conflict-free cooperation, and to communicate in a foreign language. Interpersonal competencies important in social work refer to the ability to work independently, to assume the responsibility, to work in a team, to apply critical thinking and to improve one's qualification. As noted by Adomaitienė et. al., (2017), constantly increasing changes in all spheres of life and work require for constant refreshment of knowledge.

In accordance with the post-modernist approach, social work and competencies important for performing it can be perceived as a complex activity that changes depending on the participants of the social work process – workers, clients, and context (Adomaitienė et. al., 2017). The issue of the need for managerial competencies when dealing with different service recipients and providing different services remains open.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Seeking to reveal the essential management competencies of social employees when working with different groups of service recipients, an ethnomethodological direction of research was selected. It enables reviewing a broader spectrum of social activities and understanding of the way people interact in social contexts where they find themselves and of the way they perceive and manage their environment. A semi-structured interview was applied. The survey included social workers who held at least higher qualification category, had more than 5 years of practical experience and directly provided social care services to children deprived of parental care or elderly or disabled people in establishments.

The survey was carried out in one of the largest service centres that offers social care services to both groups of service recipients.

Care services in Lithuania are licensed and have specific descriptions regulating them. However, in practice, there remains space for development of work functions by enhancing and individually tailoring the services offered. In total, the research included 20 informants (5 – providing services to elderly and/or disabled people, 15 – providing care services to children in a community children care home).

RESEARCH FINDINGS. APPLICATION OF MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES OF SOCIAL WORKERS WHEN PROVIDING SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

Social care is defined as the entirety of services provided in establishments where an individual lives permanently or for a lengthy period of time, or arrives to spend a part of the day (Adomaitienė et. al., 2017). Managerial competencies can manifest when providing care services in different activities and at different intervals. The research aimed at identifying the key managerial competencies, i.e. those applied frequently or regularly when providing social care services. Although the services are of the same type – care – the research allowed identifying the need for different managerial competencies when working with different groups of service recipients. One of major differences pertained to public relations competencies. Social workers who provide social care services to elderly individuals regularly collaborate with administration when to draft various information and promotional materials. They are particularly actively engaged in the dissemination of the information on services offered, their availability, and procedural changes to the health care specialists. Social workers contribute to the shaping of the public attitude to the elderly and disabled, thus reducing their discrimination (Kavaliauskienė, et. al., 2017). For this purpose, various publicity measures are invoked, for instance, open door days. Public relations competence is less salient for those social workers who work with children placed in care. According to the informants, children care in a community home is not a service that should be exposed to publicity, seeing that the children's situation is the outcome of painful circumstances. On the other hand, in the society, stigmas and taunting in respect of children in care are still widespread. This notwithstanding, social workers working with both groups participate in various public activities representing the values of the establishment. Cooperation furthering function that characterises the public relations competence is inherent to both groups of workers, albeit for different purposes. They cooperate closely with the employees of the adoption service, social workers of the municipality, and care centre and social partners to strengthen the ties between the child and their biological family and to prepare the child for care in a family or adoption. For social workers providing care services to the elderly, cooperation with non-governmental organisations uniting the disabled or elderly people without relatives is of essence. It is important when providing short-term care services, where eventually the individual returns to live in their environment. Direction of such person or their relatives to various associations helps reduce social exclusion and the feeling of loneliness and obtain more information about different methods and means of assistance.

Among the managerial competencies applied in practice, the ability to motivate, lead and support the co-workers, to analyse the workload and to distribute the tasks within the team appropriately is the most notable. Irrespective of the group of service recipients they work with, social workers coordinate the work of individual care specialists and provide them with methodological assistance. However, social workers who deal with children in care tend to support their colleagues and distribute the tasks more frequently. Children are placed in care from complicated family situations, quite often with unsuitable behaviour models already formed. Social workers encounter wilful elopement of children from their place of residence, truancy, and other problems that need to be solved urgently. The children can be brought to the community children care home without a separate arrangement or preparation at any time of the day and the specifics of work dictate the necessity for flexibility and quick orientation.

Competencies in the field of economy are linked with effective management of resources, generally more inherent to the employees in executive positions. Social workers apply this competence in practice when drawing up, controlling and documenting the budget of projects, if any. In most cases, social workers are in charge of the municipal level projects and their administration.

Performance quality guarantee competencies are strongly expressed through effective planning skills that are significant for social workers working with both groups of service recipients. Workers draw up plans of their activities and reports as well as plans of work with service recipients, i.e. together, they plan for actions and measures aimed at achieving positive changes in the situation of service recipients. For both groups of social workers, ability to follow the guidelines of work, i.e. internal documents of the establishment and documents governing social care, is relevant.

Need for intercultural competencies, especially the knowledge of a foreign language and understanding the intercultural differences became more evident as the number of the war refugees from the Ukraine increased. The need for these competencies is more prominent in the group of workers dealing with children in care. Social workers working with refugees sometimes also have to make the effort to understand cultural differences and traditions of other nations better and simultaneously explain the values that we cherish and our laws without offending the dignity of foreigners.

The expression of interpersonal competence, particularly in the field of responsibility, is first and foremost linked with the service recipients. For the child placed in care, the establishment is often the legal representative that does more than just take care of their health and safety. When providing social care services to the elderly, naturally, the responsibility for their safety, health, protection of confidential information, and effective provision of services remains.

However, when adopting the decisions of strategic importance for the service recipient, generally, it is possible to discuss it with their next of kin or family.

In summary, it can be stated that the need for managerial competencies of social workers who work with children in care can be prominently seen in more diverse areas as compared to the social workers who work with the elderly or disabled in an establishment. Both those working with children in care and with the elderly feel the need for collaboration and establishment of partnership relations in practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Managerial competencies enable the social workers to attain more effective results at work; however, when working with different groups of service recipients, priorities for competencies and abilities differ. This was confirmed by the findings of the survey of two groups of social workers working with different service recipients.

Public relations competencies are more prominently expressed in the group of workers working with the elderly. In the meantime, in the group of those working with children in care, public relations competencies more often play the role of inclusion rather than information provision or positioning.

Competencies of cooperation are significant when carrying out the direct functions of work included in the content of the service as well as when ensuring an integrated approach to the services provided and multiagency inclusion.

The need for the ability to motivate and interpersonal competencies is more expressed in the group of those working with children in care. This need is largely determined by the specifics of the service and nature of responsibility.

It is noteworthy that the competencies in the field of economy were more prominently expressed among employees administering projects and substantially less dependent on service recipients.

Performance quality guarantee, especially planning skills, are relevant when working with both groups of service recipients.

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