

Roni Strier, Sharon Binyamin

Introducing Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practices in Public Services: Rhetoric to Practice. "British Journal of Social Work"
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The text focuses on the topic of anti-oppressive social work. It is important that this discourse has become a main point in many theoretical discussions, but, especially in public social practices, the impact of its principles is still marginal. Studies documenting the process by which anti-oppressive practices are implemented do describe the endeavors of non-governmental agencies and the grassroots initiatives of community organizations. Yet, despite growing interest aroused by the anti-oppressive approach, its real impact on public services is still unknown. This article by Roni Strier and Sharon Binyamin describes the case study of a comprehensive and long-term change process whose aim was to develop a new model in public social services, one based on anti-oppressive principles. This text discusses emerging questions connected with the viability of a new perspective in the practice of social work.

The starting point is to explain what anti-oppressive social work is. At the core of this perspective is that it aims to change the procedures and the structure of services delivery through macro-systemic changes. This is done on the political and legal level. Anti-oppressive practice embodies a person-centered philosophy. This is strongly connected with reducing the deleterious effect of inequalities – most of all, the structural ones – in people's lives. It is a way of structuring relationships between individuals "that aims to empower users by reducing the negative effects of social hierarchies" (2014: 2101) on people's interactions. We have to understand that we are all equal and there is no hierarchy.

There is an idea which Karabanow supports: the anti-oppressive perspective should attempt to build a respectful environment for those populations which are marginalized. Moreover, the environment has to be safe. The process should always be located in the specific context. It is important to enable people to notice and understand the connections between their life experiences, the social conditions, and the dominant ideologies. According to the guidelines of the anti-oppressive model, the people's understanding is always formed in the various contexts in which they live. Any implementation of anti-oppressive practices in the field of social work would require extensive changes in the culture and organizational structure of services. Not only individuals need to be active.

It is necessary to add that there is one gap between the anti-oppressive perspective and public social services. The former is intensely oriented towards social change, and the latter deals with the basic needs of individuals and groups of clients. There is then a conflict between the services delivered by the highly regulated public system and the more unconstrained anti-oppressive discourse. It is justified to question how to connect both ways? There are several elements that can be identified in this area. The idea then

is to bring new solutions to the existing reality and not to completely revamp the whole system.

The theoretical rationale behind the transformation of social services in the spirit of the anti-oppressive perspective may include, among others, adopting contextualized and structural views of client problems, developing client representation, developing non-hierarchical work relationships between social workers or agencies and clients, and promoting social rights. In addition, this also entails the creation of a non-bureaucratic organizational culture of agencies, acknowledging unequal power relations with clients of the system, creating alliances with clients, and responding to ethnic, class and/or gender diversity. One of the most important elements is to arouse reflexivity and critical consciousness among social workers and clients. Social workers, through self-reflection and self-evaluation, gain the possibility to draw nearer to the core of social work – i.e., understanding people and relationships between particular elements of social conditions. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of incorporating all these solutions into the daily practice of social work. Anti-oppressive practices are still rare in the sphere of public social services. Moreover the theoretical discussion on the viability of this approach is still in its infancy as well.

Roni Strier and Sharon Binyamin stress that “the public social services have probably become the most criticized social institution”(2014: 2103). Such criticism comes from several sources of note. The first one stems from the dominant neo-liberal discourse which is connected with violation of the image of public services and the systematic dismantling of the welfare state. The neo-liberal policy favors the social system that generates an “anti-welfare political climate”, high levels of poverty, and punitive reforms, and – what can be considered the greatest threat – intensifies the further degradation of the social services sector. The public system is being transformed by privatization which could lead to the abandonment of customers.

The second source of criticism is connected with the neo-managerial school of management. The point is to take a critical view on the impact of this ideology on social services. According to the authors, neo-managerialism has harmed the ability of many services to respond to the needs of their most vulnerable groups. Furthermore, this ideology undermines a social worker’s capacity to fulfill his/her fundamental social mission – namely, to promote social changes.

Finally, the third source is derived from a general dissatisfaction among the consumers of public services. The problem is that public services are slow to react to the lack of solutions to the most pressing social problems. The environment wherein social workers provide services stymies the ethical nature of their mission. Public social services have an image which does not support the change. The system is portrayed as taking part in the labeling of marginalized groups and strengthening the discrimination. It is not surprising that social services for excluded populations – as well as people without a voice in society – are something of a fertile ground for oppression.

It is necessary to stress that public social services are the primary and sometimes the only source of institutional support for groups living in poverty. The general criticism

against social services is based on the concept of a unique social mission. Yet we have to understand that they are tools to achieve the goals of society, not simply commodities that can be exchanged on the goods market. Furthermore, they cannot be assessed only by standards of costs, profit, efficiency or outputs. The point is to change the ways of thinking and understanding about the role of agencies and services.

Sharon Binyamin and Roni Strier describe in their article a case study at the Family Aid Centre (FAC) in Jerusalem; referenced is the implementation and development of new forms of assistance in public welfare services. The starting point is to stress that welfare services in Israel are delivered by the municipalities with central and local governmental funding. That means that the government lays down the regulations, but only local welfare bureaus are sovereign in the development of the system. In the past almost all social workers were employed by the state, but a trend towards outsourcing and privatization has resulted in new patterns. Many services are provided by NGOs and the new privatized system includes the provision of essential needs for groups. Against the alarming rise of social inequalities and poverty a comprehensive proposal has emerged for the restructuring of public social services.

The new service-agency was developed as a joint initiative of private foundations interested in funding and promoting innovative solutions and the municipal, public social services. This initiative was the result of a rise in poverty in Jerusalem, and increasing demands for services which ran parallel to government cutbacks in personnel and budgets. In the first evaluation studies, social services were defined (before intervention) as “a situation of a permanent state of emergency” (2014: 2105). Social workers were interested in fulfilling their mission in a more holistic way; they wanted something more.

It took some years to define a theoretical framework for the change. FAC was defined as an agency focused on supporting clients whose fundamental problem was poverty. It was oriented to support the clients’ strengths and pay attention to their needs. The satisfaction of the clients is monitored constantly. The Family Aid Centre aims to provide a high level of services – accessible, flexible, easy, and connected with needs and sensitivity. The point is to develop an egalitarian worker-client relationship based on a non-hierarchical structure and to intensify a reflective organizational culture through dialogue and relations. The new services seek to build strategies and create coalitions to mobilize the community. The key is to encourage alliances and partnerships between workers and clients on three levels: individual, group and community. Developing innovative intervention methods that can integrate the community, workers and experts is in the spotlight of FAC. It promotes the participation of clients in decision-making processes.

The Family Aid Centre is defined as an agency delivering services, adopting the structural theory of client poverty, working with client definitions of the problem, and developing an intervention methodology that should be understood as a multilevel solution. FAC encourages class, gender, ethnic and cultural awareness, and fortifies competences. Promoting participation and reflection, changing the professional status of frontline social workers, and improving service delivery are still at the heart of the idea of FAC.

This article by Roni Strier and Sharon Binyamin calls for a debate on critical questions for the future of social work and the services system. It is based only on a case study which is explanatory. The essence is to touch up on the implementation of new solutions in the field of social work. It is necessary to focus on the activity of individuals, groups and communities. There is a lot of power in people and this should be utilized to the fullest. The implementation of anti-oppressive practices can be understood as a very interesting way to improve action in the field of social work. People have to understand that all of us must invest some work and effort to incorporate new practices into the organizational culture of the existing social services system. To debate this question, everyone concerned should ground their theoretical studies and experiences on agencies. It is possible to develop services for people living in difficult conditions by incorporating new perspectives into daily practice. The new solutions adopt a more contextualized view of client problems – simply because people win a voice and represent themselves. The anti-oppressive approach is based on more egalitarian and less hierarchical solutions. Furthermore relations and dialogue are in the limelight in this perspective.

The widely understood system of social services needs to be changed. The anti-oppressive approach delivers a lot of inspiration for all the workers and clients who want to create something new. It is worth trying to implement new perspectives in Poland: agencies cannot continue to ignore the changes in social life.