

THE USE OF THEORIES OF ACTION IN THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES: THE CO-CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

Social work with families is a specific social work field in which the social worker works in the midst of complex interactions between individuals, the family and the community. The proposed model of social work with families presented in this paper is designed for students, practitioners and academics to help them reflect on theories used in helping processes and their influences on direct practice in those instances in which social workers seek answers on how to act in complex processes of providing help to families. The model encourages the use of theoretical knowledge and offers social workers a choice of different theoretical concepts, which they can reflexively use in specific practical cases to co-create good results for families, while their members and the social worker collaborate in a unique working project of help. At the same time they all contribute to the development of a useful theory for the practice of social work with families.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the development of knowledge in social work with families in Slovenia attempts to respond to social workers' needs in practice, past research (Čačinovič Vogrinčič & Šugman Bohinc, 2000; Sunko, 2001) has shown that social workers' use of theoretical knowledge is not explicit enough with theoretical concepts often being used in a partial and unreflected way and complemented with unprofessional common-sense approaches. This has led to further analyses – aimed at defining what is happening with the application of knowledge in practice.

The main aim of this paper is a presentation of a model of social work with families and a theoretical discussion about its main components. This model has been designed on the basis of empirical research results *and* theoretical concepts.

First, a short report on empirical research into the use of knowledge in the practice of social work with families in Slovenia (Mešl, 2007) is presented. The research results encouraged further research into the ways of applying findings to practice. The main questions were: What are the obstacles in practice for social work? What makes the agreements or co-operation stop? and How can we act differently?

The following paragraphs present the model (Figure 1) of social work with families which was designed to contribute to social workers' more explicit use of theoretical concepts in seeking answers on how to co-create good outcomes together with service users in complex processes of providing help to families.

Although the model is based on Slovenian research and placed in the Slovenian context it is also available for international use. Being founded on contemporary social work concepts it gives social workers an opportunity to choose from various types of knowledge and to adjust them to different institutional work contexts. It also tries to offer some answers on how to integrate theory and practice which is an ongoing discussion in social work (e.g. Lüssi, 1991; Turner, 1996; Payne, 2001; Fook, 2002; Rosen et al., 1999, 2003; Healy, 2005; Osmond, 2006).

SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES: THE SLOVENIAN CONTEXT

Social work with families requires specific skills and knowledge for action in complex unique working projects of providing help to families (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006). A large body of knowledge has been developed (see Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2003, 2006) on this specific work field in Slovenia that can be tapped into to provide useful support in practice.

The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana is the only Slovenian faculty providing a graduate degree programme in the field. In the third year of the programme the subject Social Work with Families which includes both theoretical and practical social work

with families is a required course. This academic subject includes different sub-fields of work with families (such as foster care, divorce, domestic violence etc.) and presents two specific concepts: the working relationship and the unique working project of help developed by Čačinovič Vogrinčič (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006).

The working relationship describes the relationship between social workers and users: it implies cooperation in doing some work together; it defines relationships and conversations that make changes possible. It is about the »how« component in social work. Establishing a working relationship is the first, highly professional task of a social worker. The working relationship mobilizes, empowers. The basic elements are: agreement to cooperate, instrumental definition of the problem and co-creating solutions (Lussi, 1991), personal guidance (Bouwkamp & Vries, 1995). Those three basic elements are embedded in the context of contemporary concepts in social work: the strength perspective (Saleebey, 1997), the ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994), co-presence (Anderson, 1994), and actionable knowledge (Rosenfeld, 1993). In the working relationship social workers and users create unique working projects for and with users. Working projects are outlines of steps that bring co-created solutions into action (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006).

Social workers in Slovenia can practice social work with families in different institutional contexts of social welfare. The main institutions providing help to families are centres of social work (covering the welfare of children and family, financial social assistance, parental protection and family benefits etc.). There are 62 of these centres in Slovenia that are established and funded by the state and respond to the needs of two million Slovenian residents. Other institutions are homes for the elderly, schools, various non-governmental organisations etc. Although the terms of reference for the social work tasks are determined by the different institutional contexts of practice (Healy, 2005), the core subject of social work with families stays the same:

»The subject of social work with families is providing help to the family in solving complex psychosocial problems. The working relationship provides instrumental definition of the problem and co-creation of solutions in which families mobilise their strengths through the process of co-operation. Social work with families can be described as a unique working project of co-operation which is co-created on the basis of understanding, agreement and joint formation of solutions in order for the participants in the problem to become the participants in the solution« (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006: 27).

Social work with families needs to be clearly defined as social work at the very beginning of co-operation with a family. According to Čačinovič Vogrinčič (2006: 21), the complexity of work requires a social worker to simultaneously work at both levels: »The first level is the level of work on and formation of solutions within the concept of the problem's instrumental definition. At the second level the family dynamics is addressed, meaning that a social worker responds to ways in which family members treat each other.«

RESEARCHING INTO THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES IN SLOVENIA

The research, which represented an important element for the model development, focused on social work theories of action. A theory of action can be defined as a theory of reflexive behaviour which, for its performer, is a control theory serving at the same time as an explanation or a prediction of the performer's behaviour (Argyris & Schön, 1974: 6). The focus was on the functional application of social workers' existing knowledge in practice or, using the words of Rosen et al. (1999, 2003), how practitioners can and do rely on control-capable knowledge, which guides practitioners in the selection and implementation of interventions aimed at successfully attaining the desired outcomes.

Based on the premise that competent social workers usually know more about carrying out quality social work than they can articulate (Schön, 1987, 1991), the challenge of the research was to find out what was actually used in practice. The aim was to identify and operationalise models of action in social work with families in Slovenia to take some steps toward greater transparency of practice. The question was not the use of knowledge in general or the functions of knowledge and their actual transfer to direct practice (for more, see Rosen et al., 1999, 2003; Osmond, 2006), but which theories of action were used by social workers in helping processes and how this influenced and was reflected in direct practice. Therefore the research focused on what Argyris and Schön (1974) call espoused theories and theories-in-use - the implicit knowledge forming social workers' behavioural world.

METHOD

Qualitative and quantitative methods of data collecting were employed in the research and data were processed using both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

DATA COLLECTION

Research data was collected in three phases in the period from 2004 to 2007:

- the first contact with the social workers included in the research; the interview in the field of their work, their theoretical starting points, etc.; the collection of written documentation for the analysis (in 2004)
- the second contact with the same social workers: in-depth interview on the working process in the chosen case, the filling in of the evaluation scale for all cases chosen by the social workers for the research (in 2005)
- the third contact with social workers – the group interview (a reflection on the research results) (in 2007).

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

There were two levels of sample selection. On the first level five social workers employed at five different social work centres² were chosen. A convenience sample was made considering the purpose of the research. The aim was not to obtain data which could be generalised to the overall population of social workers in Slovenia, but to make an in-depth analysis of some social work processes involving families which would provide more thorough insight into the different kinds of action and their explanations. The criterion of selection was: social workers work in different areas of social work with families; they work in different towns across Slovenia; they take part in further education; and they have at least 15 years practical experience in social work.

On the second level 25 working cases were chosen. Five social workers, chosen on the first level, gave 25 dossiers on work with families. They chose dossiers based on criteria of satisfaction with the results – at least two cases in which they were satisfied with the results and at least two in which they were not. The aim was to see the difference in work process regarding the social workers' satisfaction. Some selected more than four cases so they offered a total of 25 dossiers from which the working process could be seen.

MEASURING INSTRUMENTS, VARIABLES, DATA SOURCES

The evaluation scale operationalised four concepts of work, which in the first research phase social workers defined as espoused theories. These are: the working relationship, the administrative procedure³, the reality therapy, and the systemic-cybernetic approach. Each working concept was defined with 11 variables. Each variable had three values: »I did not act accordingly«; »I acted accordingly although inconsistently«; »I consistently acted accordingly.«

Each social worker filled in the scale for all the cases she had offered for the research. This allowed the researcher to gain insight into the theoretical concepts which the social workers, in their own opinion, used in individual work cases. The evaluation scale was also used for the analysis of the 25 dossiers which had been offered for research by the social workers.

Additional research data was obtained through an in-depth interview with each social worker on the working process in the chosen case. Three main questions framed the interview: What happened in the case? What did you do? and Why did you do that? Here

² The research results were influenced by a specific institutional context while only social workers who work with families at social work centres participated in the empirical research.

³ Considering social workers' definitions of what guides them in practice, administrative procedure, which is defined by law and it is not a theory of action, is also included.

the whole process of family social work was in focus, and we couldn't determine limited variables. The focus was on three areas: the event, the action of a social worker, and the purpose of the action.

DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

The evaluation scales filled out by the social workers for all 25 cases (each social worker filled them out for her chosen cases) were processed with the SPSS Programme Package. The frequency distribution for each variable was designed. First, the indexes for each concept of work were designed, and then the average values for the indexes were calculated. The researcher also analysed all 25 cases by inserting parts of the texts from the dossiers into the evaluation scale (for each case separately) matching the provided definitions. Thus, the statements about a way of working, from which the measuring instrument consisted, served as codes for the qualitative analysis of the overall material. Also, estimates of the degree of consistency of individual actions were recorded. This material was processed in a similar way as the social workers' estimates – with the SPSS Programme Package.

The material gained in interviews was analysed with the computer programme WIN-RELAN-GABEK for the qualitative analysis of linguistic data (Zelger, 2002).

RESULTS

For the purposes of this article only the basic table (see Table 1) with quantitative results (gathered with the evaluation scale) is presented showing the (in)consistency in the use of the different social work concepts. It shows a comparison of the social workers' and researchers' estimates in the evaluation scales of all 25 cases (the number is shown in the third column). In the first column four working approaches are marked which the social workers used in their work with the chosen cases: the working relationship (**delind**); the administrative procedure (**uprind**); the reality therapy (**realind**); and the systemic-cybernetic approach (**sisind**). The ending 'n' in each pair indicates which estimates refer to researcher's evaluation. The second column shows the mean values of the estimates (the maximum is 22) in each approach; first the social workers' estimates and then the researcher's are presented in each approach. This column shows that the social workers used all four working concepts⁴.

⁴ Several interpretations are possible here: 1. the reason lies in the methodological approach; namely, different approaches are not operationalised and specifically defined well enough in the evaluation scale; 2. the theories resemble one another (the same goal, a different expression – also the social workers pointed this out in the group interview – above all, they see similar elements in the working relationship concept and in the reality therapy) and 3. in reality, the social workers draw from various theories (eclecticism).

They defined the working relationship concept as the one they used the most consistently (18,68), followed by the reality therapy (16,36), the systemic-cybernetic approach (13,6) and then the administrative procedure (5,88).

Table 1

Comparison of the means of the indexes of individual working concepts

		Mean	N	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
Pair	delind	18,680	25	3,145	0,629
1	delindn	13,200	25	6,519	1,303
Pair	uprind	5,880	25	9,029	1,805
2	uprindn	7,000	25	8,210	1,642
Pair	realind	16,360	25	2,841	0,568
3	realindn	4,480	25	6,198	1,239
Pair	sisind	13,600	25	3,027	0,605
4	sisindn	10,160	25	6,269	1,253

However, the researcher's estimates for all four groups differ significantly from those of the social workers. In three cases (working relationship (13,2), reality therapy (4,48), and systemic-cybernetic approach (10,16)) the evaluations are lower, while in the administrative procedure (7,00) they are higher than the social workers'. The *t*-test showed that in all comparisons of the social workers' with researcher's estimations the statistical differences are significant.

The low mean value in the administrative procedure means that social workers did not use this approach in all cases because it was unnecessary. A further analysis of the data showed that when they did act according to the administrative procedure they consistently applied all of its elements. The low mean value in the reality therapy (in researcher's evaluation) is the result of the methodological decision to analyse the dossiers describing this working approach only with regard to those social workers who were specifically educated for this approach. The mean value of the indexes for each social worker indicates a similar trend to the one seen in the table of common data above.

Important results were also obtained from interviews with social workers. For the purposes of this article the common table (see Table 2), which shows the number of all prescribed codes in the causal analysis of the interview-gathered material, is presented.

Table 2

The Number of used codes in causal analyses of all interviews

code	event	action	purpose of action
number	70	105	30

Numbers show that codes aren't equally distributed. The highest number in the action field shows that the social workers spoke mostly about their action when talking about a concrete case. There is the lowest number of codes describing the purpose of action. When social workers were asked about the purpose of their action, which they described as a reaction to events, we expected to determine their implicit theories of actions.

DISCUSSION

There could be various reasons for the differences in the mean estimates of the use of the different working approaches, which could be seen in Table 1. One reason is that the researcher's evaluations were based on the analysis of written documentation, while the social workers had the integral picture of the process in which they had participated in mind. Another possible substantiation of the differences lies in the gap existing between the espoused theories and the theories-in-use which define the social workers' behavioural world in practice. When asked in the first interview what theoretical starting points in their work were, espoused theories of action were named by social workers. These are theories of action to which they pay allegiance and which, upon request, they communicate to others (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

The above interpretations were confirmed by the social workers at the third meeting, when a group interview was organised in which the obtained research results were presented and the social workers were invited to reflect. First, they looked for the reasons of the results obtained, due to the fact that the researcher's analysis referred only to the written material. But they also said that the results made them reflect on the degree to which they actually used the presented concepts in practice. What surprised them most was the large deviation in the working relationship item, as they thought this was their basic theory of action which they drew from in practice. The social workers agreed with the interpretation that the concept of the working relationship was their espoused theory which they knew, felt close to, and drew from, but which they had not actually fully espoused to become their consistent theory-in-use in all its elements.

In the quantitative part of the research the individual variables of each concept were also examined more thoroughly. Three elements of the working relationship (Čačinović

Vogrinčič, 2006) were used the least consistently compared to the other four. Those are the agreement on co-operation, the strength perspective (Saleebey, 1997) and actionable knowledge (Rosenfeld, 1993).

The most consistently used are all elements of the administrative procedure when this approach was used by the social workers in their work with families.

In regard to the systemic-cybernetic approach and the reality therapy, elements which stand out as being the least consistently used in them are those which require social workers' specific actions clearly defined by that approach (mirroring, reframing, research into images in their quality world etc.).

The low number of codes of purpose of action (Table 2) shows that practitioners, included in this research, don't have words to name their practice, especially to explicitly connect the actions with suitable theoretical concepts, which led their actions.

These results, which showed inconsistent use of knowledge and inability to reflect on its use, encouraged the reflection on how to contribute to the more explicit use of theoretical concepts in family social work practice in order to co-create good outcomes with service users. The thesis was that the more explicit use of theoretical knowledge creates an important difference in practice giving practitioners confidence to continue working in the field of social work more consistently⁵.

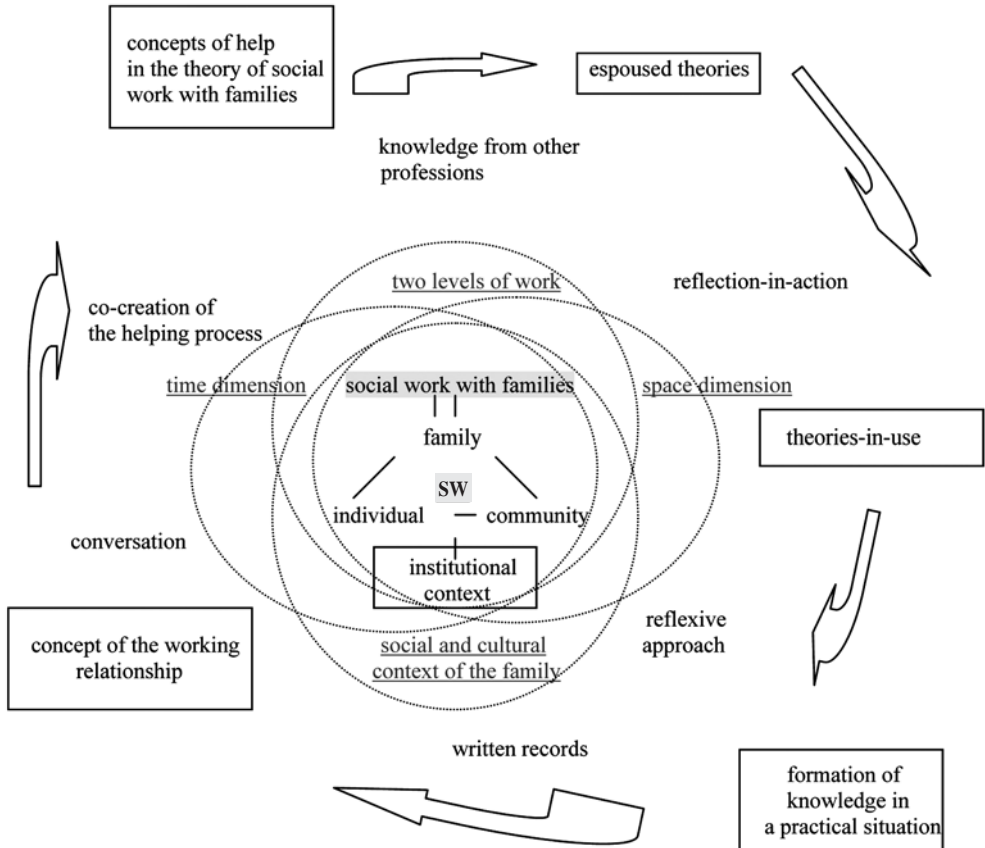
THE MODEL OF SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES

Drawing from the results of the empirical research, relying on existing knowledge in family social work and understanding of the social work theory a selection of theoretical concepts was made, and then combined into the model of social work with families (Figure 1). It represents a possible step towards the more explicit use of theoretical concepts and more competent action in practice in order to be able to co-create good outcomes together with service users.

⁵ Results from in-depth analysis of the five processes of work with families, which due to length limitation can't be presented in this paper, show that social workers' attempts to provide help are often stopped, the agreements are stopped and an administrative procedure comes forward. Five models of work were designed based on the abovementioned analyses, which contributed to the developing of the presented model.

Figure 1:

Social work with families: The co-creation of theory in practice



Due to the dynamic and circular nature of the model, the explanation of its components can start at any particular point, encompass all the necessary parts and be concluded at the chosen »beginning«. In the following sections the concept of help in postmodernity is presented which opens up space for the co-creation of desired outcomes by all participants in the helping process. In each further section parts of the model (see the titles) are being explained theoretically, and some of them are connected also with the research results presentation and discussion.

THE POSTMODERN RE-DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF HELP

The literature about the postmodern approach offers a wide variety of viewpoints regarding the usefulness of the postmodern paradigm for social work. There are different

nuances of postmodern thinking. This is clearly shown by Rosenau (Parton & Marshall, 1998: 245) in her conceptualisation of the difference illustrated in terms of two kinds of postmodernism, the »affirmative« and the »sceptical« one. She sees them as the extreme poles of the postmodern perspective continuum.

It is the very shift from the »sceptic« to the »affirmative« postmodernist which may present an important step forward for social work in postmodernity. In this light, a promising postmodern framework for contemporary social work is offered by the concept of the working relationship (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006) in that it enables a new understanding of both the relationship between the user and the social worker in processes of help, and of the importance of the process of their co-creation of favourable outcomes (e.g. the concept of the ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994)). The concept of the working relationship is also promising in allowing its participants to become aware of the power of language, the power of a careful use of words (e.g. Andersen, 1994) and new words which add strength (e.g. Saleeby, 1997).

Parton and O'Byrne (2000) add an important emphasis by presenting research findings which show that, rather than certain models or techniques used by a social worker, what importantly influences good outcomes are quality and the value of experience. This does not mean that all social work is about establishing a »**relationship**«, although this is important; rather, it is about our understanding and accepting difficult and painful experiences with the help of conversation. **Conversation** and **language** are the key to the possibilities of understanding and gaining control.

CO-CREATION OF HELP: ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP

The concepts of the working relationship and the unique working project of help as developed by Čačinovič Vogrinčič (2006) place themselves within the postmodern and social-constructivist concepts of help; they put users in the role of the co-creators of help, which is an important, new task for effective social work. The working relationship in social work guarantees and safeguards the conditions in which participants in the problem can co-create the helping processes by participating in the co-creation of solutions and the unique working project of help.

In Slovenia social workers are acquainted with this concept and are increasingly using it in their work with families. However, although the concept of working relationship was defined by the social workers participating in the research as their basic espoused theory on which they lean in their practice, the analysis showed that their use of the working relationship is neither consistent nor explicit enough. Some authors consider that this concept has little to do with practice and is not operationalised enough in terms of knowledge use in practice (e.g. Lüssi, 1991, Payne, 2001). In addition, Rosen et al. (2003: 209) write about the

importance of developing practice guidelines for intervention to facilitate the use of relatively complex knowledge in practice. Yet the working relationship concept is very clearly defined **for** practice as well as being a concept arising **from** practice. In the third research phase the social workers confirmed that. Perhaps a more appropriate interpretation why the working relationship is not consistently used can be found in other parts of the model explanation (see Institutional context, Espoused theories and theories-in-use).

CONCEPTS OF HELP IN SOCIAL WORK THEORY

Different theories add varying shares to the richness of the theoretical knowledge needed for the establishment and maintenance of unique working projects of help within the working relationship. Possible concepts which are relied on in contemporary social work are Lüssi's (1991) concept of the participants in the solution, Saleebey's (1997) social work from the strengths perspective, and Parton's and O'Byrne's (2000) constructive social work. They offer a rich choice of tools for the formulation of **a personal practical model** as named by Constable and Lee (2004). Healy (2005) speaks about **frameworks for practice** – developed over time, through experience – for the formation of unique responses to every practical situation where formal and informal knowledge and skills interweave.

SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES

Speaking of families in social work, we understand them as a plurality of family forms (see Walsh, 2003; Rener, 2006 etc.). With each family it needs to be established how they live, what they need, what are the individual's or family's definitions of a family. Within social work open and accepting definitions are needed. These definitions need to remain flexible towards what is seen in and heard from families themselves.

As shown in the introduction, social work with families in the Slovenian context is based on the contemporary concepts of social work and keeps abreast with the development of science, contributing itself significantly to this development. Contemporary concepts (see Čačinovič Vogrnčič, 2006) imply taking a key step from the understanding of help as actions of a professional who knows and has solutions towards the conceptualisation of help as the co-creation of good outcomes which are necessarily co-formed in the working relationship with the people who participate in the helping process.

Constable and Lee (2004: 261) define social work with families as help to family members in restructuring their relations with the help of communication and interactions. They argue (*op. cit.*: 8-9) that social work with families is social work with individuals in the family, couples and family units. Social workers works in the midst of complex interactions between individuals in families, and with social institutions when these can help families carry out their relational tasks.

According to Constable and Lee (Ibid.), who also contribute to the understanding of social work with families as being work at two levels, social workers help families solve relationship problems, problems with connection and belonging, and problems in situations of external and internal tensions (op. cit.: 2). The authors say that social workers help family members do **relational work**. »External« problems demand the co-creation of solutions, mobilisation for finding a solution, while »internal« problems should be solved to the extent which enables the family to co-operate in the helping process.

WORK WITH DIVERSE FAMILY FORMS: TIME, SPACE, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSION

In complex projects of help to families competent social workers must respond to a wide variety of family realities. The time dimension opens up the space for the research and naming of a family's developmental path and tasks which families and their members are confronted with in their specific life periods. The spatial dimension implies the important discourse about the family structure, rules, borders, roles and needs which direct a social worker's research of the family dynamics to the necessary »second level« of work, to the resolution of »internal problems«. The social and cultural dimensions open up the space for a conversation about the family realities connected with their belonging to a certain culture, class and group. It is a conversation about values and norms and it offers space for research into family rituals, religious and other beliefs.

In order to encourage the consideration of each family as a culture, diverse within itself, according to Madsen (2003: 40) the so-called intercultural metaphor should be applied to the processes of help to families. According to the metaphor individuals or families are regarded as »microcultures«. This view promotes awareness and respect of families' diversities and avoids confusing them with more general meanings of the term »culture«.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The practice of social work with families is influenced by the institutional context of the legislation, politics and adopted practices which form the institutions within which social workers work. The institutional context sets the framework for the performance of tasks and defines what social workers should formally do (Healy, 2005).

The fundamental finding of the research (Mešl, 2007) is that the social workers fulfilled those tasks which are imposed by law, while the specific nature of social work treatment is reflected in the way individual cases are treated; often though this is not supported by social work concepts, which creates problems for this complex and demanding work, repeatedly confronting social workers with the dilemma of whether they should continue to co-operate with users, making agreements and proceeding with the common work on their plans

or whether they should withdraw and comply with administrative procedures. Here again their work is influenced by the institutional context, the legislation and adopted institutional practices. Undoubtedly this is also an important point of entry of the formal knowledge in social work and social workers' own practical work frameworks.

The basic questions here, already raised at the beginning of this paper, are: What are the obstacles in practice for social work? What makes agreements or co-operation stop? The analysis indicates (Mešl, 2007) the lack in use of such social work concepts which would strengthen social workers in their unique working projects of help, that is in establishing and maintaining processes of making agreements with users in the co-creation of solutions, thus also contributing to the maintenance of the special nature of social work – even within the institutional context of social work centres.

KNOWLEDGE FROM OTHER PROFESSIONS

Social work is a science involving different concepts, including knowledge from other professions. Diversity is necessary in social work and contributions from other sciences are needed in order for helping processes to be effective. Other sciences can contribute with additional knowledge providing answers to »how to act« in social work with families as well as via their knowledge about families.

The diverse models of family therapies⁶ can be considered such special knowledge. Psychological knowledge is also very important in contributing to knowledge about the family. The explicitness of the family reality along with verbalisation of possible good outcomes when family dynamics are addressed and research »at the other level« is made together with the family. Sociological knowledge about families helps placing social work with families in the wider context of families in today's society.

The diversity of the concepts and knowledge from other professions puts in front of social workers the task to make a selection and integrate knowledge in very concrete social work projects of help. For example: working relationship with a family gives a practitioner a social work framework within which he can and must choose knowledge from other professions acquired during education (e.g. elements from solution focused therapy (scaling questions, exception questions etc.) to help him in researching ways towards solutions;

⁶ *Different authors discuss similarities and differences between family therapy and social work with families (Lüssi, 1991; Vries & Bouwkamp, 1995; Constable & Lee, 2004; Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006 etc.). Social work with families is not family therapy, but it can have therapeutic effects in the process of the co-creation of good outcomes. The main distinction between the two lies in their subject definition: in family therapy the starting-point is help regarding changes in the family system, while social work with a family starts when a complex psycho-social problem needs to be solved and in this context changes in the family are being sought and enabled.*

and he has to use knowledge from family psychology to make solutions possible (e.g. what changes in family rules, roles, communication etc. are needed)). Social work education has an important role in equipping students to be able to make unique connections in concrete situations.

ESPOUSED THEORIES AND THEORIES-IN-USE

Schön (1987, 1991) draws from the assumption that competent practitioners usually know more than they can tell which can also be transferred to social work: usually competent social workers know more about carrying out quality social work practice than they can tell about. Nevertheless, social work needs a step further. We need knowledge and words to be able to name our work, to tell the users what we are going to do and where we are aiming to proceed, in order to be able to check, research and co-create our next steps together with them. This is why we have to research ways that will allow moving closer to explicit definitions of our actions.

Some general theoretical concepts help us better understand the processes of the integration of theory and practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974). In order to be able to understand theories of practice we need to understand theories of action in more detail. That is why we need knowledge about the following two concepts: **the espoused theory** and **the theory-in-use**.

When people are asked how they would behave in certain circumstances, the answer we usually get is one which presents their **espoused theory of action** in that specific situation. This is the theory of action to which they pay allegiance and which, upon request, they communicate to others (e.g. in the research all social workers defined working relationship concept as their espoused theory). On the other hand, **the theory-in-use** actually guides an individual's actions and forms their behavioural world. The theory-in-use can or cannot be in accordance with their espoused theory; the individual can – or cannot – be aware of the disharmonies of the two theories (e.g. the research results showed that the working relationship is not always social workers' theory-in-use, sometimes none of the theoretical knowledge is and commonsense approaches become theory-in-use). The individual's theory-in-use cannot be recognised by simply asking an individual about it; rather it has to be constructed through observation of their behaviour.

REFLECTION-IN-ACTION AND REFLEXIVE APPROACH

The framework for research in social work, the framework for what we can choose for our profession and for more competent acting in practice is presented by three approaches to the creation and use of theory in practice. They might give an answer leading to the more consistent use of such knowledge.

Technical rationality is the epistemology of practice which comes from positivist philosophy. According to Healy (2005: 97) this approach advocates the standpoint whereby social work should be based on rational knowledge validated through scientific methods. This movement promotes the approach implying theories are developed and used »from top to bottom«. It is about the researchers developing and testing social work theories and then the practitioners using them in practice.

Schön (1987, 1991) presents another approach which he thinks is most suitable for the needs of competent practitioners. **Reflection-in-action** differs from other reflections because it is attributing direct importance to action. In reflection-in-action new thinking about some parts of our knowledge-in-action leads to on-the-spot experimenting and to further reflection which influences what we do (Schön, 1987:29). Fook (1999, 2002) writes about the usefulness of reflection-in-action. With the reflective approach she sees a way for one to make one's own theory rather than to be »by theory driven«.

In spite of the advantages of the reflective approach Healy (2005) calls attention to several problems. Emphasising intuitive and tacit knowledge means allowing the basis of our knowledge to remain inaccessible to users, financers, employers etc. Also when a practitioner's reflection is considered the »truth« of social work practice, this approach does not allow room for a critical study of the claims formulated by a practitioner. This approach does not guarantee a dialogue between a practitioner's intuitive knowledge and the formal theories for social work practice. By focusing on uncertainties and complexities this approach leads practitioners to ignore those aspects of social work where some degree of certainty is possible and necessary.

The reflexive approach to the use and development of theory comes from the viewpoint that there is no conflict between theory and practice once we get to know that social workers use theory as well as **create theory in practice**. This is not about simply applying formal theory, but it could be used as the basis for the formation of knowledge in practice (Healy, 2005: 94). Taylor and White (2000) developed this approach. Fook (2002: 43) says that a reflective process and a reflexive stance are not mutually exclusive and it is possible that the methods of reflective practice might aid someone to become more reflexive. Drawing from the reflexive approach, Healy (2005: 102) recognises that knowledge and the use of theory are continually constructed – partly through a practitioner's experience as well as through resources such as the practical context and its formal theoretical basis.

FORMATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN A PRACTICAL SITUATION

According to Healy (2005: 219), the aims of social work are formed through negotiations between the institutional context, expert knowledge and the basis of skills as well as our own frameworks for practice. The construction of the framework for the practice of social work is a creative process in which we draw from ideas stemming from numerous sources.

They present a combination of formal knowledge and skills and informal knowledge and skills which social workers develop in practice. This combination includes formal theoretical and practical knowledge as well as tacit knowledge and knowledge which is difficult to articulate, the knowledge which social workers can build on by being repeatedly exposed to practical situations.

The author (op. cit.: 219) points out another important aspect of the use and development of knowledge by stressing the importance for social workers of using their own frameworks of practice in order to influence the formal basis of the practice and institutional contexts of our activities. The building of theory in a tacit and non-formal way is not enough for social work to be able to build a bridge between the profession's formal theoretical basis and the theoretical basis developed by practitioners.

WRITTEN RECORDS

Recording is an important subject in social work - it is about the development of the theory of social work. Lishman (1998) says that the promotion and development of good practice are the collective responsibility of all social workers, adding it is not enough to be able to identify what is good practice; rather we also have to be able to evaluate it. An important task for the development of social work with families is to improve the recording of working processes and the publication of cases of good practice. Also the proposed predesigned ways of recording could contribute to a more consistent recording so that the concepts of social work used in practice would be evident in the records on social work. Consistent recording in the language of social work with the explicit use of the working concepts does not mean a bigger time-load for social workers: if social workers have knowledge which they can name, then they can write it down in a shorter way, thus ensuring evidence of the working process.

CONCLUSION: MODEL(S) OF SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES?

The proposed model is a dynamic model – including various interlocking and co-dependent themes and action levels. Its circular nature also means there is no beginning and no end, no prescribed order in which the presented model should be used step by step. This could present a weakness in the eyes of those who prefer clear step-by-step instructions on how to work in practice. But it can also present its strength due to a possible space being opened up for a social worker to be able to choose how to act in every specific practice situation. Its strength also lies in its contribution to a central yet often neglected question in social work: it seeks answers to »how«. How to work is the question which is (re)opened in postmodern social work.

One can see weakness in the model being too theoretical to be useful for students and social work beginners. Perhaps it is hard to adopt it without co-speaker, who can help

reflect and make connections between theoretical knowledge and acting in practice. The thesis is that in social work a co-speaker is crucial, especially in teaching processes. The model can be of great use in social workers' education in presenting and evaluating theory and practice integration.

The model can help experienced practitioners, beginners, students and academics reflect on theories of actions used in family social work helping processes and their influences on the direct practice.

The author wished to formulate a useful and efficient model of help for families in social work which follows the postmodern paradigm of the establishment of the process of help which families co-create together with social workers. When this goal was set I knew I was entering a complex workfield and possibly taking on an impossible task which seemed contradictory from the very beginning. Is it not contrary to the postmodern paradigm to think about **one model** which should be adopted in social work with families? Can we answer the complexity of social work with families with one model? Can we formulate the model which will not close the space for a creative response by social workers to concrete practical situations, but will open it for the uniqueness of families and their family members and will at the same time be sufficiently useful in practice?

Throughout the research, on one hand the goal's contradiction kept corroborating itself while on the other so did its sensibility. Its contradiction was finally accepted as a challenge: the criterion of the adequacy of the model for social work with families has become its openness, offering social workers a choice of different theoretical concepts and encouraging them to rely on them. The aim is to use knowledge reflexively and competently in concrete practical cases when co-creating good results for families and their members, and at the same time contributing to the development of a useful theory for the practice of social work with families.

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KORIŠTENJE TEORIJA DJELOVANJA U PRAKSI SOCIJALNOG RADA S OBITELJIMA: SUSTVARANJE ZNANJA U PRAKSI

SAŽETAK

Socijalni rad s obitelji specifično je polje socijalnog rada u kojemu socijalni radnik radi usred složenih interakcija između pojedinaca, obitelji i zajednice. Predloženi model socijalnog rada s obiteljima predstavljen u ovom članku predviđen je za studente, praktičare i akademsku zajednicu da im pomogne da reflektiraju o teorijama koje se koriste u pomažućim procesima te da sagledaju njihov utjecaj na neposrednu praksu na onim razinama gdje socijalni radnici traže odgovore kako djelovati u kompleksnim procesima pružanja pomoći obiteljima. Ovaj model ohrabruje korištenje teorijskog znanja i nudi socijalnim radnicima izbor između različitih teorijskih koncepata. Ta znanja mogu reflektivno koristiti u specifičnim praktičnim slučajevima za stvaranje dobrih rezultata za obitelji. Članovi obitelji i socijalni radnici surađuju u jedinstvenom suradnom projektu pomoći pri čemu svi oni doprinose razvoju korisnih teorija za praksu socijalnog rada sa obiteljima.

Ključne riječi: *suostvarivanje sa obitelji, prihvaćene teorije, teorije koje se koriste, istraživanje, refleksivan pristup.*

