SOCIOLOGIE
ŞI ASISTENŢĂ SOCIALĂ

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK

Aims: *Analele Ştiinţifice ale Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" din Iaşi. (Seria nouă). Sociologie şi Asistenţă Socială* aims to promote the remarkable results of scientific and empiric researches of professorates, researchers, students, and practitioners in the field of humanist sciences in order to stimulate the optimal functioning of academic and social fields. Analyses and theoretical-methodological sociological explanations as well as the exemplification of their values at the political and social work strategies and interventions level are welcome.

Penitentiary Social Work from an Agentic Perspective

Sorina POLEDNA[1]

Abstract

Starting from the characteristics of the prison and the implications of the restriction of liberty, the role of social work and the specific profile of the social worker in the penitentiary is discussed regarding the „passing ritual" of the prisoner from the experience of detention to community life. For this purpose, his accountability becomes an important dimension around which convergent efforts can be matched to his/her rehabilitation and social reintegration. The accountability of the persons deprived of their liberty is seen not as an end in itself, but as a multi-level construction, in different areas of society, aiming at multiple and complementary ends. These steps to accountability, we analyse them from an agentic perspective, from the concept of agency, a construct that implies a set of qualities that contribute to the personal competence and the force of an autonomously engaged person, in a deep and long-term pro-social change.

Keywords: prison, social work, agency, rehabilitation, accountability.

Résumé

En partant des caractéristiques de la prison et des implications de la restriction de liberté, le rôle du travailleur social et le profil spécifique du travailleur social dans le pénitencier sont abordés en ce qui concerne le „rituel de passage" du détenu à partir de l'expérience de la détention dans la communauté de vie. À cette fin, la responsabilité de la personne détenue devient une dimension importante autour de laquelle les efforts convergents peuvent être corrélés avec sa réadaptation et sa réinsertion sociale. La responsabilité des personnes privées de liberté n'est pas considérée comme une fin en soi, mais comme une construction à plusieurs niveaux, dans différents domaines de la société, qui vise des objectifs multiples et complémentaires. Ces étapes vers la prise de responsabilité, nous les analysons dans une perspective agentique, à partir du concept d'agence, une construction qui implique un ensemble de qualités qui contribuent à la compétence personnelle et à la force d'une personne impliquée de manière autonome et profondément visant un changement prosocial à long terme.

Mots-clés: prison, assistance sociale, agence, réadaptation, responsabilité.

---

[1] Assoc. Prof., Social Work Department, Babes-Bolyai University, M. Kogălniceanu str., No 4, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, email: polednas@yahoo.com

Rezumat

Pornind de la caracteristicile închisorii şi implicaţiile restricţiei libertăţii, rolul asistentului social şi profilul specific al asistentului social în penitenciar este abordat cu privire la „ritualul de trecere" al deţinutului din experienţa detenţiei în comunitatea de viaţă. În acest scop, responsabilitatea persoanei deţinute devine o dimensiune importantă în jurul căreia eforturile convergente pot fi corelate cu reabilitarea şi reintegrarea sa socială. Responsabilitatea persoanelor private de libertate este văzută nu ca un scop în sine, ci ca o construcţie pe mai multe niveluri, în diferite domenii ale societăţii, care vizează finalităţi multiple şi complementare. Aceşti paşi către asumarea responsabilităţii, noi îi analizăm dintr-o perspectivă agentică, pornind de la conceptul de agenţie, o construcţie care implică un set de calităţi care contribuie la competenţa personală şi la forţa unei persoane angajată autonom într-o profundă schimbare pro-socială pe termen lung.

Cuvinte-cheie: închisoare, asistenţă socială, agenţie, reabilitare, responsabilitate.

The detestable solution we cannot live without

The space surrounding the special profile of penitentiary social work is the prison. Some of its given definitions, some of them becoming classic, remind us that we are talking about a "punishment of the civilized society (...) in which liberty is a good that belongs to everyone in the same way and everyone feels bound to it by a universal and constant feeling." We also know that we have to deal with a "complete and austere institution" (Foucault 1997, 344), a "total institution" that captures all dimensions of the individual's life and develops implications beyond its wall (Goffman 2004).

These effects, some intentional and related to the safety of society and the correction of the sanctioned (control, supervision, strict rules), others not intended and problematic for both the prisoner and for those around him (dispossession of roles, restricting self-determination, diminishing the decision-making capacity and the exercising of the decision-making and resolution skills and thus limiting the assumption of responsibility), all these implications emerge from what constitutes the defining principle of imprisonment, namely, the isolation of the prisoner from the society. Foucault, referring to this reality, said that: "The shortcomings of the prison are well known, like the fact that it is dangerous when it is not useless. And yet, nobody "sees with what it could be replaced". Prison is the detestable solution we cannot live without" (1997, 344). This conclusion, which is still valid today, also highlights some paradoxes:

a . We find it natural to send to prison the people who violate the criminal law, but we do not think, just as natural, that their social reintegration is our concern, as society, not only the concern of those who have already experienced detention.

b . The internal tension between the mission of the prison and all related to isolation explains why the work concerted with the prisoner is necessary, during his/her entire sentence, as well as after liberation, by several

categories of specialists in order to counterbalance the non-intended effects of the liberty deprivation.

c . Seen from this perspective, the penitentiary social work has a complicated mission (together with educational, psychological and spiritual approaches), that answer to a key need, the safety of the citizen.

The role of the prison, the result of its functions (specific and general deterrence, incapacitation, restitution, rehabilitation), has been built from the very beginning around two objectives: public safety and the recovery for the society of the punished person. "The length of the punishment must not measure the exchange value of the crime; it must be adapted to the "useful" transformation of the prisoner during his conviction. Not a time measure but a finalized time (...) if the punishment established by law has as its main objective the reparation of the crime, it also wants the rehabilitation of the prisoner. This transformation must be expected from the internal effects of imprisonment" (Foucault 1997, 360).

Is it possible to attain at the same time these effects that ultimately aim at changing the punished and his/her returning to society as a citizen with a lawful behaviour?

Here is a legit question, if we take into consideration that somewhat paradoxically, once in prison, the individual must/is required first to adapt to the carceral environment and the detention regime. However, this adaptation is not limited to the learning of some directives, rules, behaviours imposed by the regulation of the unit of detention; at the same time, adaptation means exposing to and adapting, to some extent, the values, rules, and behaviours of the detention subculture. Prisonization is thus insinuated, with every day of detention, by building new and new barriers to the achievement of the objectives targeted by the act of justice.

From this perspective, the rehabilitation just like the imprisonment, are two sides of the same reality. Both refer to a re-socialization process. The promoting of one (rehabilitation) and the discouraging of the other process (prisonization), requires an approach, specific to social work as well, which recognizes the influence of the context on the behaviour (Krogsrud, O'Melia and DuBois 2006, 29). Such perspective helps us to highlight some aspects that circumscribe the specificity of penitentiary social work:

The beneficiaries are involuntary clients, they are in an artificial environment that limits their freedom and self-determination, causing among those in detention, turmoil, problems and concerns that, as the research shows, can be grouped mainly around eight areas: privacy, safety, support/self-improvement opportunities, emotional feedback, social stimulation, activity, freedom (Toch 1977).

The role of the social worker is complicated because it involves apparently ambivalent role dimensions that take place along a continuum of role tasks that simultaneously involve both support and control. On the one hand, the social worker contributes to the adaptation and "normalization" of the detainee's life in

the penitentiary (according to the meaning that the Northern penitentiary system gives to the term normalization, namely the experience of detention must be as close as possible to the normality of life, in order to reduce as much as possible the effects of "deculturation"). On the other hand, the social worker supports the prisoner in preparing for his/her return into society in a pro-social manner. However, this ambivalence of role finds its solution insofar as the penitentiary social work manages to organize and support the process of re-establishing the balance between these two "worlds" and perspectives for reporting on the deprivation of liberty and society's expectations regarding the return of the ex-prisoner into society, contributing directly to the "passing ritual" from prison to life in the community.

From this perspective, the accountability of the prisoners becomes an essential stake in the above-mentioned approach, around which the efforts can coagulate both from the carceral space (prisoners, practitioners, institutional context) and from society.

The prisoners' accountability, an oxymoron?

If isolation is the defining principle of imprisonment, and this is, in many aspects, a full institution that suspends social roles and limits the self-determination opportunities of the convicted person, can we still speak of the possibility of accountability for the prisoners during the sentence? We are trying to answer this question by suggesting an agentic analysis perspective:

Do we rally to those who consider that accountability is not an end in itself, but a multi-level construction, each level representing accumulation of personal skills, and capitalizing on the relevant resources that allow the prisoner to reach a level of individual and social capital, that supports his/her efforts to change the his/her value horizon, the perspective of oneself and others, his/her decisions, and last but not least, his/her behaviour. These accumulations materialize in *different areas of the individual's social functioning* (family, workplace, group of friends, community) and address *different aspects* such as taking responsibility for their own past behaviour and its consequences, but also for their own future. For this purpose, the accountability activates that sense of connection with oneself and with their own actions, thus developing a positive perception of self and a sense of responsibility for one's own life and the others. That is why we believe that accountability can be seen as the expression of accumulations for behavioural rehabilitation and thus a precondition for the social reintegration of the convicted person. During his/her sentence, a key objective of the social work approach of the prisoner, the accountability includes interventions that promote: positive social identity, autonomy, responsibility for past actions and their consequences, but also taking responsibility for their own future (mapping personal goals).

Penitentiary social work

The role of social work has been defined as an effort to mobilize both the internal resources of the individual to reach his/her maximum potential as well as social resources to facilitate the creation of opportunities for the individual. (Krogsrud, O'Melia and DuBois 2006, 30). To this end, its basic functions can also be interpreted: a) the restoration function expressed in at least two concepts, curative and rehabilitative; b) the function of facilitating the access to the development resources that increase the social capacity and the relation of the individual beneficiary of the social work.

Using from this perspective the conceptual suggestion from the social work field we can state that the penitentiary social work is a professional field involving „the interaction and the management of several systems: the society of the client system, the direct beneficiary/the prisoner, i.e. the target system, the action system consisting of methods, techniques, know how, services, engaged by the social worker, considered, next to the others specialists with who he/she works within the penitentiary and in the community, the system agent of change (Pincus and Minahan 1973). By virtue of this professional role, a special profile of the social worker is emerging. He or she performs at the same time as a *general social worker* (working with various categories of beneficiaries, evaluating, organizing, planning, coordinating various types of services, activities and programs, interacting with various systems in the justice and community spheres), but also as a *specialized social worker* for the work in the context of the justice system, respectively the penitentiary system. To these levels of intervention and professional competencies, we believe that there is another addition, referred to by Lymbery and Postle (2007), which we consider especially relevant for penitentiary social work. As the two authors point out, a paradox of today's social work practice is the certainty of uncertainty and the need to ensure certainty in the context of uncertainty. Hence, the importance of creating a set of attributes and a conceptual framework that defines the competencies of the social worker who is able to manage the labour uncertainty with a multi-problematic category of beneficiaries. We are talking here first about the need for a better understanding of how social workers work and develop their knowledge base in relation to specific contexts, and then, to the way they develop a more abstract and generalized knowledge, that Fook (2007) calls contextualism, in a characterization of what it considers to be the "new professionalism" of social work. Contextualise requires openness and tolerance for what is different and implies both the ability to work with the whole context and in relation to it, and the appreciation of how specific contexts can influence the actions and interpretations of all the systems involved (Poledna and Grosu 2017, 136).

Seen from this perspective, the specificity of the work in the penitentiary social work field reveals a creative mix of knowledge, skills and values agreed with the prison mission and folded on the characteristics and the needs of the prisoners, the social worker in the penitentiary contributing to creating certainty in the context of a lot of uncertainties defining especially the post-detention

period. At the same time, one can speak of a social worker's art that, in creating hierarchy and operationalizing values in the social work with the prisoner, in professional engagement with him/her, in the development of programs, interventions and activities, contributes to the development of capacities and resources to be able to pass the test of the returning of the prisoner into the community, helping him to manage (also) on the basis of the pro-social accumulations during detention, the subsequent uncertainties.

The agentic perspective on prisoner accountability

One of the capacities on which social reintegration and the overcoming of criminal behaviour depends upon is *the agentic capacity*. I propose this phrase because I find it very comprehensive and integrative with regard to the ways of defining and the meaning of the concept of origin, that of *agency*. Its ways of defining in the literature are varied, coming from different theoretical and professional areas and include dimensions and aspects. We can, therefore, consider the agency rather a construct of a psychosocial nature that involves a set of qualities that develop a person's personal competence and strength. A concept that covers a complex reality that some authors describe as the ability of the person to intentionally exert influence over his or her functioning and life circumstances (Bandura, 1994). Or as directed activity, intentionally to a goal. In terms of this capacity, we refer to an active body that has dreams, plans, and actions (Casey, Day and Ward 2013, 37). Matza (1964) talked about a sense of control over his own destiny while Farall and Bowling (1999) referring to the agency talk about the individual's ability to "structure" his/her own behaviour and the one of others that is to practice their will during the interactions with the real world. (Healy 2013, 557). In other words, we refer to the individual resource, a personal force consisting of various expressions of personal competence, starting from the cognitive one (its ability to reflect on the choices he/she can make and implicitly to take responsibility for the effects of his/her own decisions) and to the social-emotional one (a self-perception that reflects a sense of his/her own value, concern for others and interest in "redemption of sins").

Characteristics of agency capacity such as a) intentionality, i.e. representing the future course of actions to be undertaken, b) setting objectives and anticipating desired results that guide and motivate the individual, the effort, c) the ability to build a proper course of action, d) The ability to make the necessary corrective adjustments based on reflection on personal effectiveness is particularly relevant for describing the contours of this essential dimension in prisoner's transformation (Healy 2013, 574).

Because we do not refer to accountability in general, but to concrete aspects of assuming responsibility for social roles and social functioning areas well-determined, these characteristics of agency capacity are closely linked to the objective of accountability of prisoners. Therefore, the assumption of responsibility does not come from itself, but is facilitated by the agency, that is by the ability of the person to intentionally exercise influence on his/her functioning

and his/her concrete circumstances of life, to set his/her goals, to build a course of action appropriate to their attainment. Here are some questions: How do we develop this capacity through penitentiary social work programs and activities, when and how does this constructive approach take place? Here are some possible answers:

The process of accountability of the prisoner can begin, in our opinion, upon receiving in the penitentiary (setting immediate needs, continuing with the initial assessment, identifying needs and formulating the individualized plan, recommending programs according to the results of his/her assessment, taking into account age, cultural characteristics, identified risk factors and execution regime). It is actually achieved by including it in programs in line with the criminogenic needs and the identified resources. It is completed by the formation of agency capacity. A particular role in this approach is the *development of motivational competence*; that is why the use of the motivational interview is considered particularly important because it can be employed both as a stand-alone intervention and as a precursor of another type of assistance. Thus, by operating one of the principles of the motivational interview, i.e. the one aimed at the individual's understanding of the difference between the present situation and the objectives, the social worker will guide the prisoners with specific questions in order to help them analyze and recognize the discrepancy between their present behavioural problems future goals, to motivate them to make the necessary changes in their lives. Last but not least, developing the self-efficacy of the individual is an essential part of the motivational interview. This involves strengthening the person's abilities to respond to obstacles and succeed in the desire for change, and this is a particularly important aspect when it comes to training, empowering the prisoners to return to society and resuming social roles, despite stigmatization, discrimination and the prejudices that they often face.

The role of the programs in holding prisoners accountable

Regarding the *role of programs* in this approach to building agency capacity as pre-proxies for accountability of prisoners, we propose an integrated vision of educational-psychological-social and spiritual programs, through which this development is facilitated. For example, we talk about how aggregating the results of certain programs delivered in an integrated approach to a certain goal, such as parental responsibility, can develop the aging capacity that supports the achievement of this assisting goal. Thus, through the accumulations of the *literacy program*, the detained father can read the letters received from home and answer to his children; *parenting skills programs "Me and my child, and" A Day with Dad,* "help the prisoner to maintain and acquire the parental knowledge and skills that he can use while spending time with his child. In so doing, participation in the *alcohol awareness program* facilitates the accountability of the person in recognizing the consequences of the consumption behaviour on himself and his significant ones related to the family functioning. Thus, going through this integrated program package, which is based on a comprehensive

psychosocial assessment, can generate complementary personal skills accumulations that genuinely promote parental responsibility in a coherent and consistent manner in accordance with the needs and the realistic, concrete and relevant objectives, formulated by the prisoner himself. As an additional argument in this respect, we mention the defining features of effective interventions, that research results reveal that "generative activities", which contribute to the well-being of others, moreover, those that involve meeting with the beneficiaries of these activities, are more likely to be effective than focusing on targets and imposed tasks (Sapouna *et al.* 2015, 7).

In other words, the involvement of prisoners in programs and activities that give them the opportunity to give back something / pay back to the community by capitalizing on their own resources, those that facilitate their transformation from involuntary social / psychosocial assistance clients into volunteer clients, are experiences that produce accountability because they allow them to make choices and take decisions that engage them with others in a pro-social way. An interesting landmark for practice is the Good Lives Model, a model for rehabilitation of criminals, which places special emphasis on the strengths and objectives of the prisoner. We believe that "starting from where the customer is" from his / her needs and goals for him / her, the "generative" programs through their content and purpose must be grouped into packages of programs that consistently aim to promote the development of accountability of the prisoners, through restorative experiences. Such a package could bring together programs such as *Education to Repair, Better Decisions (Program for Decision-Making Skills), Pro-social Skills Development Program, the Independent and Responsible Educational Module of the Independent Living Skills Development Program, Civic Education Program for the training of detainees for support for people living in detention.*

Such a way of working presupposes, of course, the collaboration of specialists, the integration of everyone's contribution in an approach to the agency perspective which, using a suggestion that comes from the field of social work in mental health, we could synthesize by emphasizing its central dimensions - connectivity, hope, optimism about the future, identity, meaning of life and Accountability (Best and Lubman 2012, 593).

The establishment of integrated program packages aiming to promote the accountability of prisoners on the basis of their agency capacity and its capitalization, we see it as a structured way to use in the current conditions, more effectively the wide range of programs existing in the portfolio of practitioners / specialists in the system our penitentiary. Of course, a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of these programs, which we consider absolutely necessary, could tell us exactly which of these should be continued, thus helping to set up educational-psychological-social assistance paths to facilitate real accumulation, throughout the detention, of the resources necessary for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of persons who have experienced the experience of detention.

References

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In Ramachaudran, R.S. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, 4. Academic Press, New York.

Best, D.W., Lubman, D.I. (2012). The recovery paradigm. A model of hope and change for alcohol and drug addiction, **41** (8), 593-597.

Casey, S., Day, A., Ward, T. (2013). *Fundations of offender rehabilitation.* Routledge, London, New York.

Foucault, M. (1997). *A supraveghea şi a pedepsi. Naşterea închisorii.* Humanitas, Bucureşti.

Goffman, E. (2004). *Aziluri. Eseuri despre situaţia socială a pacienţilor psihiatrici şi a altor categorii de persoane instituţionalizate.* Polirom, Iaşi.

Healy, D. (2013). Changing Fate? Agency and the desistance process. In *Theoretical Criminology,* **17** (4), 557-574.

Krogsrud, K., O'Melia, M., DuBois, B. (2006). *Practica Asistenţei Sociale.* Polirom, Iaşi.

Pincus, A., Minahan, A. (1973). *Social work practice. Model and method.* Peacock, Itasca, IL.

Poledna, S., Grosu D. (2017). Asistenţa socială a migranţilor. Centrul de consiliere pentru persoane din estul Europei al Diakonie Hamburg. *Revista de Asistenţă Socială,* **XVI** (2), www.swreview.ro.

Sapouna, M., Bisset, C., Conlong, A.M., Matthews, B. (2015). *What Works to Reduce Reoffending: A Summary of the Evidence.* Scottish Government, Edinburgh.

Toch., H. (1977). *Living in prison: The ecology of survival.* Free Press, NewYork.