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QUALITY OF SOCIAL SERVICES - THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

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***Abstract:** This theoretical article describes and discusses the concept of quality in relation to the evaluation of social work practice. It presents some basic perspectives on quality as well as the transference of the concept of quality in social work practice. The quality in social work practice is a very multifaceted phenomenon and the concept can be approached from different perspectives and with different foci. Due to the complex nature of the practice, interventions cannot be fully standardized and their effects on the life of people are not always evident. We hope that the present article can be useful for those who initiate, conduct, and utilize evaluation of social work. Furthermore, we hope that it can contribute to an increased awareness of the importance of studying quality of social services.*

***Keywords:** quality, social service, standards,*

INTRODUCTION

In social work practice the quality of services depends, to a large extent, on the conditions preceding their provision since, unlike goods, services are used at the moment of their production and are highly dependant on the organization, the specific professional attributes of social workers, available resources and existing legislation. In practice, the focus is often placed on customer needs and quality perception of a particular product or service. Such an emphasis is not accidental - actually, the activities related to the evaluation of customer needs in Bulgaria play a key role when shaping the types of social services and their territorial scope. The present article considers some challenges in the course of defining the quality of social services. It aims to systematize some methodological parameters when defining the quality of social services, as well as to justify the limitations of the existing approaches.

EXPOSITION

1. Nature and importance of social service quality

The concept of quality, in its broader sense, provides information on how economic entities function, on one hand, and defines the willingness of customers to select a particular product among a number of others, on the other hand.

Within the development of social work as a professional practice the importance of quality has gradually been realized. S. Croft and P. Bersford (Kroft, S & P. Beresford. 2008) highlight that in earlier periods the evaluation of social service quality was provoked by the market orientation of social work practice. Garther et al define that the industrial society has been replaced by the service society as a consequence of a huge expansion of social risks and the inevitable tendency of increasing the number of customers (Garther, A & F.Riessman. 1974). Stake and Schwandt think that the focus on social service quality was provoked by the idea of customer empowerment imputed to social work practice in the early 90s (Stake, R. E. & Schwandt, T. A.2006). As a result of that empowerment and the introduction of "care management", the monitoring related to data analysis and proofs of service quality evaluation has been strengthened. The main purpose of that transformation is to improve the process of service provision (Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. 1997).

The private market in the service sector is, in itself, a strong argument to enhance monitoring because, as Sinclair says, “how could we be sure that public money has been spent well and providers compete for both quality and price” (Sinclair, Q.2008). The indications of difficulties noticed in quality evaluation require timely development of respective tools which should ensure flexible and pragmatic registration of survey questions and monitoring design and units so that they can correspond to the subject under study, namely the social service, accessible resources and interests of stakeholders.

Analyzing a number of methods for determining service quality, J. Cheetham concludes that there is not any research method that could be always preferred due to its potential to elucidate all quality aspects (Cheetham, J & Fuller, R. 1995).

2. Subject, perspectives and difficulties in determining social service quality

Regardless of the reasons for the increased attention to social service quality, there are still questions to be responded to: What do we monitor and track? What standards guide us when determining service quality? How do we perform evaluation? Social workers, their supervisors and experts always come across the above issues, which appear of great significance in terms of methodology. Actually, those questions refer to:

- the subject under evaluation - in particular, the respective social service and in a broader sense - social work and social interventions;
- the criteria that guide experts in their current monitoring and quality review;
- the forms, methods, procedures, techniques and tools by means of which social service quality is implemented in practice.

We will further consider each question with a view to outline specific challenges.

2.1. The question related to the subject under evaluation

That question could be approached from different perspectives, which should be integrated in the course of real assistance work and direct work with customers:

- Theoretical perspective - it results from the theoretical descriptive models defining that social services contribute to human development, changes in human behaviour and relationships between people, social adaptation, quality of life, well-being, etc. At first sight, it is fairly clear that quality of services, in particular quality of social services, cannot be accurately measured since it is usually defined as a category which describes the characteristics of a given entity (Dahler-Larsen, 2008). Within manufacturing industry we talk about different qualities of clothes, automobiles, etc. and their features can be compared or at least graded as better or worse whereas in social work practice and social services we define abstract intangible entities referring to structure, process, ultimate goal.

- Legal and regulatory perspective - quality evaluation is considerably influenced by customers who are holders of both rights and choice. Therefore, customers become co-producers of the service and respectively the main factor in quality evaluation. In this context it is important to monitor whether it comes closer or shifts away from accepted standards and prescribed best practice procedures. The differences in the interpretation of standards and the individual views of both service consumers and service providers significantly affect social services. Hence expectations and comparisons play a pivotal role in determining the quality of social work practice (Stake & Schwandt, 2006). As Stake and Schwandt state “Quality is multifaceted, contested, and never representable”(Stake & Schwandt, 2006).

- Methodological perspective - it is the main focus when determining quality. The projection of the overall methodological model of service provision ensures coherence, coordinated cyclicity and continuity between the phases through which the person being serviced, the social worker and the customer social environment go.

Summarizing the above perspectives it could be concluded that quality determination of social services encounters a number of difficulties. The existing perspectives, concepts and theories appear a starting point on the basis of which an evaluation of that abstract category could be made.

2.2.Perspectives in measuring social service quality or what do we exactly measure

Reflecting upon the quality characteristics in the area of social work, Dahler-Larsen (2008) suggest to define quality from five perspectives:

1. reducing variations around a defined standard;
2. obtaining certain effects;
3. reaching declared political goals;
4. meeting the preferences of the users;
5. securing quality by the organizational system.

All the above perspectives presume a broader interpretation of quality. They are observed and monitored separately yet in a dynamic relationship, i.e. this is namely the main object of observation - the activation of the "social service" factor, the effect of the service on the system so as to positively transform it, the neutralization of unfavourable factors, the change of its internal "strengths distribution" in favour of customer stabilization and improvement of their social and functional autonomy and quality of life.

The perspectives been suggested for defining social service quality refer to various problem areas and affect different quality characteristics, which actually appears a challenge for researchers, practitioners and experts. However, the question of how to measure social service quality in terms of standards is still open. This suggests the development of specific standards whose achievement could be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. Considering social work practice in Bulgaria and, in particular the Social Services Bill, it could be summarized that for the first time the activities performed by social workers in their direct work with customers are suggested to be typologized. Hence, specific standards will be defined on the basis of the proposed activity types. There are various standards for providing social services to children and adults, which turns out to be a challenge that impedes social work. The availability of methodological differences between the types of social services, the institutions providing them and the objectives set in advance by service providers assumes more accurate formulation of service quality standards and hence the definition of tools for quantitative and qualitative evaluation of quality.

On the other hand, the Bill stipulates the development of standards related to the outcome/effect achieved by the respective social service. It is obviously the qualitative side of quality evaluation since it clarifies the level of customer satisfaction. According to the basic groups receiving social services the following question arises - "Will specific service users be able to provide clarity on the level of their satisfaction?". On the other hand, when setting the standards and qualitative measurement of social service quality, the relationship between the customer and the social worker cannot be standardized. As stated by a number of theorists, main aspects such as commitment, trust and sincerity play a key role in evaluating social work practice but they are often non-measurable or at least non-definable. (Frank and Frank, 1991; Howe 1987, Knei-Paz, 2009; Miller & Rollnick, 1991).

To the above outlined theoretical definitions we could also add the fact that the main effects of social services can be evaluated after the delivery of the service, and their most frequent manifestation is the customer positive change (Lumijärvi 1999). Authors and practitioners consider the effects/outcomes of social services as societal effects, effects at organization level or effects on customers (Vornanen R., Polkki P., Pohjanpalo H. & Miettinen J. 2011). Hannu Kauppi (*Kauppi, H. 2004*) highlights the societal effectiveness of services as according to him that concept is collective and entails both the effects of the activities been performed and their consequences in the long run.

Therefore, quality in the area of social services focuses on the improvements been achieved throughout the life of users and society at large. In this context it is difficult to determine whether that positive change results solely from the interventions and the cooperation between the customer and the social worker (Roberts & Yeager, 2004).

If we look at the third perspective on defining social service quality, namely the level of reaching political goals, we will also come across obvious conflicts. According to existing

legislation social service providers are the state, the municipalities, physical persons registered under the Trade Law or legal entities and persons registered under the legislation of an EU or EEA Member State. However, there are not any regulated bodies through which the state should perform its role of a service provider. The fact that part of the services is funded by the state is insufficient for it to become a provider. That perspective in considering the quality issue draws attention to how different participants in the service provision process are organized. Focusing on providers, especially on the type of organization (municipality, NGO), could result in underestimating the multi-disciplinary approach to social service provision, which is considerably dependant on the cooperation between different experts and organizations.

Users' preferences are an important factor when providing social services. Within the developed concept of social services, the principle of customer's freedom of choice is maintained, as well as the definition of users' satisfaction. Such measurement of quality undoubtedly results in obtaining feedback on the nature of services and respectively contributes to continuously developing interventions and activities. Nevertheless, it is also worth emphasizing the fact that the recipients of the respective social service are not only the direct users. In many case we talk about a combination of interventions on the extended family, parents, teachers and recipient's social environment.

The fifth criterion related to the definition of social service quality refers to the organizational system of the services. This perspective entails the idea that quality is a matter of control that should be built into the organizational structure. This type of "quality assurance" often involves different documentation systems which ensure continuous gathering of adequate data.

These five perspectives provide a basis that takes us part of the way to understanding the meaning of social service quality and, in particular, the difficulties we come across when defining it. Therefore, it is very important to pay attention to the forms, methods, procedures, techniques and tools by means of which social service quality is evaluated in practice.

2.3. Brief notes on the forms of quality evaluation

In particular, this issue concerns the quality evaluation of the respective organization, processes and results.

We may also face some difficulties here both in theory and practice. Not disregarding those differences, in the present paper we stand up for our viewpoint that the quality of the organization strongly depends on the material and human resources, competence levels, the specific nature of the customers being serviced, including the locations where the social services are provided. The quality of processes is entirely connected with the work procedures, attitude to customers, content of social workers' tasks and working environment. The quality of results denotes the organization's goals and results, as well as what has actually been achieved and whether the achieved effect is in compliance with the official goals.

CONCLUSIONS

The present article aims to systematize some methodological parameters in defining social service quality and to justify the limitations of the existing approaches. The theoretical review clearly confirms that the definition of social service quality appears a challenge for theorists, practitioners and experts. The variety of research approaches and the limitations in their application demands a clearer definition of standards and professionalization of social work. The limitations related to the definition of social work quality, and presented in this article, are of great importance for Bulgarian social work practice. More than a decade a reform in the area of social services has been implemented. The increase in the number of users and types of social services will pose further challenges referring to the definition of their quality.

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