



Exploring Social Work Through the Context of Professional Education in Ukraine and in the Double Degree Programme in Social Services with a Focus on Diaconia and Christian Social Practice.  
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*'Tell me, will this road lead me to the temple?'*  
*- 'This street is named after Varlam. This street does not lead to the temple.'*  
*'Oh, then what is it for? Why do you need a road if it does not lead you to the temple?'*  
From the movie "Repentance" by Tengiz Abuladze

## Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss the praxis of social work as professional education and practical profession nowadays. First, I will focus on my experience of work in the position of a teacher in the Department of Social Work and Organizational Management in Odessa State Polytechnic University, Ukraine and then this will be contrasted to the experience received in the Double Degree Programme in Social Services with focus on Diaconia and Christian Social Practice, run by the International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action, Central and Eastern Europe (interdiac) and accredited by Charles University, Czech Republic and Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, Finland. It is not my intention to go deeply into the pedagogical details and comparisons, I would rather try to outline some essential points for exploring some relevant features of social work professional education nowadays. Finally, I want to argue that contemporary social work is a field of many activities and it provokes and encourages a dialogue where the possibilities for social change are born. In line with the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, I intend to show that for a professional in social work it is crucially important to withdraw oneself from the social reality, develop one's own self-comprehensive position and then work *with* people for change.

## Social work as professional education and practical profession in Ukraine

I was introduced to social work as a teacher in the Department of Social Work and Organizational Management in Odessa State Polytechnic University, Ukraine. I had to develop two dimensions in my studies: social policy and applied forms and methods of work with youth. Within the second subject my students themselves developed and presented some activities for disadvantaged children and youth. In this quite diverse professional field I stumbled over some major contradictory issues related to the aims and implementation of social work in Ukraine. I want to review them briefly below.

The first point of my review is related to social policy and I will refer to recent changes in the legal system, which underlies the essential features of social work, introduced by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine. Generally, it may be concluded, that from the beginning of the XXI century our state basic model, which is claimed to be social democratic, steadily acquired the features of residual model of welfare. In the sphere of social work it was marked with cuts in the number of state agencies, the increasing work-load of social workers, a reduction in the state financing of the agencies, etc. The relevant concept of reforming the system of social services towards the *marketization* of social services was introduced quite long ago, back in year 2007, , but lately some steps have taken towards its substantiation through legal acts. In recent years the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine has issued a standard form for the agreement between the client

and a provider of social services, a standard of quality of a social service and the algorithm of calculations of the payment for social services. It was disturbing to find significant changes in the person” (Nakaz №1246/884, 2015). In the latest edition of the profile of the typical qualification of a professional social worker one can see a list of necessary skills related to the organization, audit and provision of social services. There is even a special reference to the skills of computer management, which are needed for filling out the databases, and (even more necessary) requirement of a contribution to the development of national and patriotic values (Nakaz #285, 2016). However, there was no suggestion of starting any activity towards revision and re-evaluation of those practices in social work, which are embedded there from the Soviet times. Subsequently, a sceptical eye will not find any reference to community development, project and research work or advocacy as necessary skills.

The second point of my concern and worry is related to the students of the Department of Social Work and Organizational Management. In their performance they lacked genuine interest in and empathy towards children. In their studies they tended to avoid collective action and showed all the signs of frustration and negative motivation toward social work as practical profession. Their rebellion against the existing unjust society was splashed all over their future plans and ideas of social consensus. If you add to this picture some contemporary tendencies which are taking place in our country, such as the progressive deprivation of civil society, the increase of the external debt to the World Bank & other external banks and funds, the increase of poverty and living costs for the working population, the stirring of a nationalistic mood and outbreak of civil war, you will get a picture of sheer hopelessness. My students often asked me how they can offer help to people when they are powerless themselves and are likely to acquire the same problems in the future.

I want to underline the point that it is not a narrow issue of pedagogical methods, which puzzled me and even my students. It is a much deeper sense of being a participant in the current flow and to have a feeling that you contribute to the future. Quite long ago this feeling was fostered in us by the Soviet Union, where the Soviet “homo economicus” was working hard for the prospect of the bright elusory future of worldwide communism. Now “homo economicus” is working hard to become “homo consumericus”. And the only thing that he is obliged to consume under the rule of neoliberal society is his own pleasure. His future lies in enriching his own

possessive individualism. This was quite a rapid change from a communal to an individual-oriented social order and it provoked a lot of arguments among the students. Once, one group of students spent an hour and a half in furious argumentation and failed to reach any consensus. The feeling of some hopelessness in front of the expansive possessive individualism is expressed in scientific discourse too:

What distinguishes the new normative logic is that it does not demand total renunciation by individuals for the benefit of an invincible collective force and radiant future, but aims to secure a no less total subjection from their participation in a “win-win” game, in the eloquent formula that is supposed to describe professional and social existence. Whereas, in the old capitalism, everyone lost something—the capitalist, the guaranteed enjoyment of his goods as a result of risk-taking; the proletarian, the free disposal of his time and strength—in the new capitalism, no one loses and everyone wins. The neoliberal subject cannot lose, because he is both the worker who accumulates capital and the shareholder who enjoys it. Being one’s own worker and shareholder, “performing” without limits and enjoying the fruits of one’s accumulation unhindered—such is the imaginary of the neo-subjective condition (Dardot and Laval, 2014).

Under these circumstances social erosion undermines any relationships, because now they are only based on the solid ground of money value and exchange. It is the best way to build one’s own behaviour in the situation of a neoliberal society. Moreover, in the neoliberal society people are expected to solve the problems of their own well being effectively by themselves or with some minor assistance. However, it is presumed, that a person can easily calculate the risks and work out some solutions for supporting their own well-being. In my work with the students I could see how this idea transforms the professional practice of social work. When my students approached people in need during their diploma practice they used to put themselves in the position of an expert, who has learnt so much that he or she has a ready effective solution for every case. Consequently, they paid no regard to the life-world of the people and had no second thought about the difficulties, efforts and trials that might occur in the process of social assistance. No wonder that their diplomas were full of recommendations and statements! And for me,

as their teacher, it was a bitter situation of losing from the start. So where should I pick up my own position and my own course of action under these circumstances? I acquired the answers to my questions through the experience of working as the Responsible Teacher in the Double Degree Programme in Social Services with a focus on Diaconia and Christian Social Practice.

### **Social work as vocation and Christian practice**

I want to start from what is called a “double perspective” (Make Change Yourselves!, 2011). I see it as a call for developing the self-comprehensive awareness of a professional. It is a corner stone of the ethos of teaching or working with people for change. Paulo Freire, in his “Pedagogy of the oppressed” writes that the oppressive reality cultivates itself. And for changing the balance of its power one must step out of it and change own attitude towards it (Freire, 2000). Therefore we must critically see the reality around us and see our own roots, our own motivation. The perspective then becomes *conditional*. But the “double perspective” comes when you see the reality through the eyes of those with whom you work. In this situation you are not an expert, nor you are a transmitter of prevailing knowledge. The capacity to be critical, to see the reality around you as conditional brings us to the prospect of an unconditional future, which can be changed through *participation*. In this way teaching becomes learning and the empowerment comes from being with the world:

When we live our lives with the authenticity demanded by the practice of teaching that is also learning and learning that is also teaching, we are participating in a total experience that is simultaneously directive, political, ideological, gnostic, pedagogical, aesthetic, and ethical. In this experience the beautiful, the decent, and the serious form a circle with hands joined. (Freire 1998, 11-12).

Secondly, I want to note that modern social work, as it stated in the global definition of social work, stands against the neoliberal direction of society in the main and most important issues. It cares about the simple people in the prospect of social development, social justice and international cooperation (International Federation of Social Workers). In the innovative DDP in Social Services with focus on Diaconia and Christian Practice these aims are mirrored.

Thirdly let us reflect on the direction of change, which is, naturally, not related to enriching consumption and to a person’s own pleasure. The change is given through the Biblical context and stands on empathy, not sympathy. The Bible tells us that from the very beginning Adam was given food and living comfort. He had it plentiful food growing around him in the Garden of Eden and he could eat from any tree except for the one (Genesis. 2:15-17) But is it enough to provide human bodies with food? Reading Genesis further we see that the gifts of God to Adam were different from the basic vital needs. God gave to Adam a wife Eve, because humans are social beings, they are created in unity and harmony (Genesis. 2:18-25).

Another gift from God to man was the gift of freedom because you shall know the truth and the truth will make you free (Jn 8:32). These *spiritual* gifts raised the human being to the height of creation and in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were with God in unity and harmony. Therefore, when we look for the ways to empower change, it may be only found through relationships, respect for the dignity of a person, empathy, openness to people, freedom of choice. To work for change is not a question of provoking some rebellion or conflict, it is a work aimed at building awareness about injustice, violence in a constructive way. It seeks harmony of spirit and questions our unity.

Meanwhile, in my country along with many other countries nowadays, we can see what happens when people forget about God’s gifts. Human nature is contradictory and in pursuing individualistic aims it gains perverse forms of relations with the world and society. Fromm, analysing the phenomenon of Nazism in Germany, explains this through the notion of the “human escape from freedom”. He explains it by pointing to the fear of stepping out of the world, being an individual and living in the society where a person can fulfil his life and his nature. If a person does not live, his life energy will turn to demolition and aggression towards himself, other people or the nature (Fromm 2013, 359). This “negative” freedom of the human is more and more visible through new hostilities, new forms of inequality, social exclusion, marginalization and violence, which are developing in our society under intrusion of liberal politics.



To conclude, I want to affirm that through mutual learning and cooperation in the innovative Degree Programme in Social Services with focus on Diaconia and Christian Practice we are able to fulfil ourselves. It provides us with a rare opportunity to share, evaluate and reflect on our own experience of being with the world. It brings us together on the basis of mutual respect and stands against “banking knowledge”. In the dialogue we are challenged to explore our own biography and our own self in the search for practical, contextual strategies for enhancing sustainable change. Likewise, this process should not undermine the integrity of social work as professional education and professional activity. Accordingly, the awareness of one’s own personal ethos is developed and depends on a true code of practice and personal service model. Nevertheless, it is working towards a future, which is open, open for building conviviality within diversity, for new life and for the fulfilment of the coming Kingdom of God.

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