

INTERDISCIPLINARY COOPERATION IN THE CONTEXT OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN SLOVAKIA

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This poster is an output of VEGA Research Project No. 1/0134/17 „The importance of value orientation - expectations and perspectives of the young generation in the context of its application on the labor market“ and VEGA Research Project No. 1/0288/17 „Factors of Institutionalisation of School Social Work“

Abstract: The paper focuses on the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation between helping professionals in Slovakia. The primary focus is on the distinctiveness of cooperation between social work and other helping professions in the context of autism spectrum disorders in the Slovak Republic. It also presents partial findings of the research the main objective of which was to identify and describe the current situation in the area of Social work with a family with a member with Autism spectrum disorder. Partially, this research has underlined the eminent importance of cross-professional cooperation in the context of autism spectrum disorders.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorders (ASD), Pervasive developmental disorders (PAS), Social work, Interdisciplinary cooperation, Cross-professional cooperation, Helping professions,

1 Introduction - context of Social work with Autism spectrum disorder in Slovakia

The presented paper aims to accentuate the importance of cooperation between social work and other helping professions in the context of autism spectrum disorders in the Slovak Republic, and also to offer some of the opportunities it brings.

To meet such objectives, it is necessary, at least briefly, to mention and theoretically examine the possibilities of social work with a family whose member suffers from ASD in general, and both theoretically and empirically to elucidate its possibilities particularly in Slovakia. It describes a wide range of factors that have influence on social work in the context of ASD, comparing to others social work target groups (Šlosár, Lichner, Halachová et al., 2017). Due to restricted space, however, the present paper cannot offer a holistic view of the possibilities of social work with a family with an autistic spectrum disorder member and to identify and describe all its possibilities in Slovakia.

Finally, it also presents partial findings of research, the main objective of which was to identify and describe the current situation in the area of Social work with a family with a member with Autism spectrum disorder in Slovakia. Partially, this research has underlined the eminent importance of interdisciplinary cooperation in the context of autism spectrum disorders.

1.1 Primary research

The research was conducted in 2010-2019, and focused on the area of *one of Slovakian regions* and selected institutions and organizations, which were (or were supposed to) provide social work with families with an ASD member.

Complete data and findings and overall information about the research is available in *Sociálna práca s rodinou s členom s poruchou autistického spektra - Social work with a family with an Autism spectrum disorder member* (Balogová, Poklembová, 2018); it also describes a wide range of factors influencing social work in the context of ASD.

The data were recollected in 2018/2019. The research data were collected using an electronic questionnaire and processed in SPSS. The research sample (N=56) consisted of helping professionals (mostly social workers, psychologists, caregivers and speech therapists) working for institutions that provided for social work with autism spectrum disorders (Tab 1).

2 Social work in the context of Autism spectrum disorders

The area of social work with clients with Autism spectrum disorder, especially variety of symptoms, places high expectations on social workers regarding the background in psychology and psychiatry. This field is often considered to be a realm of other helping professions, e.g. psychology or special pedagogy.

However, we believe that in intervention and assessment of Autism spectrum disorders, social work has its irreplaceable position and it is highly beneficial to its clients as well as to other helping professions in interdisciplinary cooperation.

Tab. 1: Social work in participating institutions

	% of institutions
Social assessment of family	39.3 %
Social assessment of individuals	28.6 %
Social consulting	80.4 %
Sociotherapy	33.9 %
Social skills training	67.9 %
Mediation or facilitation	16.1 %
Administrative	67.9 %
Accompanying clients	48.2 %
Family group conferences	1.8 %
Support groups or Peer-groups	10.7 %
Social prevention	37.5 %

People with Autism spectrum disorder will most likely become social work clients. Early (and correct) assessment and subsequent intervention could greatly improve ASD people's adaptation to their social environment. For the prevention of possible and for the detection of existing social problems, social workers' knowledge of ASD distinctive features (MKCH-10-SK-2016, 2016) is inevitable. Relying on the well-known research findings and emphasizing an increased burden on families with an autistic member (Luther et al., 2005), we consider family social work to be crucial in social work intervention in the context of Autism spectrum disorder.

As far as Autism spectrum is concerned, context plays an important part in social prevention, in avoiding the creation of new or the aggravation of existing social problems. Therefore, we consider the role of school social work (Skyba, 2018) to be crucial in preventing study problems caused by ASD or by comorbid learning and developmental disorder, and also in solving peer social conflicts with possible threat of bullying or conflict with teachers (Jašková, Sabolová Fabiánová, 2019).

The economic situation, age, or gender, all of those could be a potential threat or problem trigger for individuals with Autism spectrum disorder. Autism spectrum disorders are often associated with child and youth clients (Edwards et al. 2012). There is a high risk of overlooking people with Autism spectrum disorder who have not been diagnosed yet, or are (or were at the time of assessment) just below the border (Tantam 2012).

3 Cross-professional cooperation in the context of Autism spectrum disorders

The justification for the necessity of interdisciplinary professional attitude and cross-professional cooperation in social work with people with Autism spectrum disorders has roots in the very characteristic of autism and in the wide range of symptoms and co morbidities affecting personal and professional life of clients in different ways and to a highly individual extent. The role of social workers in the context of Autism spectrum disorder is, among other tasks, professional and personal readiness to cross-professional and interdisciplinary cooperation and work.

As a main challenge, we see the creation of multidisciplinary teams built from different helping professionals. Increasing the accessibility of social services and their networking with other helping professionals in one cooperating system can significantly help to prevent stressful situations and support the acquiring of appropriate coping strategies and solving algorithms for demanding life situations which client with Autism spectrum disorder can avoid.

At the same time, those teams create space for personal and professional growth of the helping professionals involved.

4 Findings, conclusion and possible implication for social work practice

The introductory three chapters focused on the theoretical and methodological backgrounds of the topic with the aim to offer the necessary conceptual framework of the theoretical and methodological starting points of cross-professional cooperation, including social work with autism spectrum disorders.

The primary research objective was to find out whether the chosen institutions and organizations in the area of the *one of Slovakian regions* offer conditions for social work with a family with an ASD member. It can be concluded that social work with the family and individuals with ASD is an area that has created space in Slovakia, but it necessitates more theoretical and empirical attention. Identifying its possibilities, the opportunities that it offers, and putting them into practice will help improve the quality of life of individuals suffering from autistic spectrum disorder and that of their families.

In accordance with the focus of this paper, it can be said that the majority of respondents (more than 88 %) would like to cooperate with social workers while working with families with autism spectrum disorder, and more than 82 % of them have already experienced cross-professional cooperation including social workers. According to Kruskal-Wallis test, there were no significant differences between respective helping professions (Tab 2).

Tab 2: Attitude to and experiences with cross-professional cooperation including social workers

Cooperation with social work	Caregiving/nursing	Psychology	Special pedagogy	Others
Already have cooperated and would like to cooperate in the future	100,00 %	80,00 %	80,00 %	83,33 %
Have not cooperated but would like to cooperate in the future	0,00 %	0,00 %	13,33 %	0,00 %
Already have cooperated and would not like to cooperate in the future	0,00 %	0,00 %	0,00 %	0,00 %
Have not cooperated and do not know if they would like to cooperate in the future	0,00 %	10,00 %	6,67 %	16,67 %

Even though our research have not confirmed a significant difference between respective helping professionals neither in the level of interest in interdisciplinary cross-professional cooperation with social work and in, nor in level of positive approach towards social workers, respondents reacted positively to questions about their past experiences with cooperation with social workers. All other helping professionals expressed positive expectation towards cooperation with social work in future.

In everyday practice, social work most often encounters in interdisciplinary collaboration: psychology, special pedagogy, physiotherapy, nursing, medicine, health and occupational therapy. Base of interdisciplinary cooperation between social work and those disciplines is in information sharing, social counseling, street work, support and peer groups, direct work with clients, developing and monitoring the individual client plans and coordinating mutual cooperation.

The requirements on social workers knowledge and skills are high and wide, they are expected not only to be professionally trained, have practical experiences and knowledge, but also to be able cooperate with other helping professionals. In that we can see a wide area of opportunities for educators in social work in personal and professional training of future social workers as well as in presenting social work as a field of study and a profession.

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Primary Paper Section: A

Secondary Paper Section: AN, AM