

POSITIVE SOCIAL WORK APPROACH: THE SHIFT FROM “WORK” TOWARDS “SOCIAL”

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Abstract

Positive orientation has become widely recognized in many scientific fields during the last decade. Possible nature of positive orientation in social work could be derived from positive psychology. However this topic is just starting to be discussed and researched in Lithuania and other European countries. In this article the authors represent complementary social work approaches that are proved as effective in a contradiction to most applied and dominant in practice nowadays problem-oriented model of social work. Therefore, the aim of the article is to overview social work practices as a ground for starting modeling Positive Social Work (PSW). Literature analysis was employed to ground different approaches of social work and set the basis for possible Positive Social Work beginning.

KEY WORDS: positive social work, social work practice.

Anotacija

Pastarąjį dešimtmetį daugelyje mokslų pradedama plačiai taikyti pozityvioji orientacija. Socialiniame darbe ši pozityvioji orientacija galėtų būti pasiskolinta iš pozityviosios psichologijos. Pozityvaus socialinio darbo tematika yra aktuali, nes diskusijos ir moksliniai tyrimai tiek Lietuvoje, tiek ir Europoje tik pradedami. Šio straipsnio autoriai pristato papildomas socialinio darbo prieigas, kurios veiksmingos ir puikiai veikia praktikoje bei gali būti taikomos kaip atsvara dominuojančiam į problemą nukreiptam socialinio darbo modeliui. Todėl šiame straipsnyje apžvelgiamos socialinio darbo praktikos, kaip pozityvios socialinio darbo orientacijos pagrindimo pradžia. Taikoma literatūros analizė, siekiant pagrįsti skirtingas socialinio darbo prieigas ir nustatant pozityvaus socialinio darbo pradžios pagrindą.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: pozityvus socialinis darbas, socialinio darbo praktika.

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Introduction

The origins of social work profession reach as far back as the turn of XIX–XX centuries. Having started as a voluntary, charitable help for the poor and homeless carried out mainly by middle-class women, social work evolved into an organized, scientifically based activity fully meeting the criteria of the profession. Throughout its hundred years history social work underwent continuous changes and transformations and still does. This article focuses on current issues in evolution of social work which, according to the authors, are relevant and have potential to enrich the theory and practice of the profession.

The beginnings of social work professional terminology were closely connected with certain concepts of medicine. Social workers used to carry out an “analysis” of client situation, look for a “diagnosis” and apply a “treatment” (Johnson, 2001, p. 34–35). However, the development of social work professionalization and a growing need of scientifically based practice led to a turn towards the findings of the sociological research. Therefore, the main focus of social work of that time switched to a systematic cognition of client’s social environment, social ties and social inequalities (Johnson, 2001, p. 34; Blundo, 2013, p. 28). Later on, the growing popularity of increasingly developed methods of psychology and psychoanalysis during the 1930-ies had a significant influence on social work and brought yet another shift in profession’s ideology. The focus of social work was transferred from social environment, inequalities and social reform towards a person and family. Such paradigm shift gained its momentum, was widely established and, under a name of medical model of social work, has dominated the social work throughout the XX’t century (Blundo, 2013, p. 30). Medical model means finding a cause of illness or disorder and prescribing a treatment. In other words, it’s basically what social workers do today – identify a problem and look for a solution. Such processes facilitated the evolution of the problem-oriented paradigm of social work, which shaped the professional language and established itself as a set of rules and arrangements furtherly defining the boundaries of professional attitudes and contents of professional knowledge. The problem here, however, is that the content of knowledge accumulated within such approach fails by far to grasp the whole of modern reality. Furthermore, problem-oriented social work model, by implication, emphasizes rather negative sides of client’s situation: problem, disorders, vices, control, obligations, misbehaviors.

Naturally, that in the context of changing environment and emerging new patterns of social problems the search for new alternatives for medical or problem-oriented social work model is gaining ground. According to M. Herz and T. Johansson (2011), the increasing amount of scientific research reveal that social work practice is over-reliant on stereotypic approaches, while social workers too often lean on psychological methods. Systemic approach, attention to society is the farther the more abandoned in favour of attention to a personality, which results in lack of understanding of social context. Psychologic methods and approaches should yield to process-oriented and dynamic thinking, because it could facilitate a better understanding of changes, contradictions and uncertainties within social processes. Some of the possible alternatives – solution-focused approach, shifting priority from problem recognition to a change necessary to solve it; client strengths perspective, emphasizing the mutual social worker – client relationship; social support paradigm, which professes involvement of informal network into

the process of help, and several other approaches. These approaches have already been practiced for a reasonable amount of time, they show that social work means more than just putting a “diagnosis” and finding a right “treatment”, because such attitude neglects the uniqueness of a client and his situation. As opposed to a problem-oriented model, the solution-focused model or client strengths perspective can be viewed as bearing a positive implications. These models emphasize solutions, client abilities and strengths, potential for change, cooperation, mutual relationship, social support, i. e. the features which are commonly seen as positive. Focus on client strengths might be seen as a contradiction to shifting away from psychological aspects in social work discussed earlier. However, emphasis on client strengths first of all means a shift in thinking about client, ability to see client’s position within a wider social context where he can employ his abilities and efforts to engage client’s social network in the helping process, not just exploring his personality features.

During the last decade positive orientation has become widely recognized in many scientific fields. The origin of positive orientation lies in positive psychology that is now well-known theoretical approach within the discipline traditionally focusing primarily on problems, deficits and conflicts (see e.g. Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Carr, 2004; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Positive psychology is paying attention to the human potentials, strengths, virtues and successes both in individual and social levels. Positive psychology is not only taking notice to what already appears positive, but investigates also to the multiple possibilities to perceive and interpret “negative as positive” in different arena of human life settings.

However, despite the research data proving the effectiveness of alternative social work approaches, problem-oriented model continues to dominate social work theory and, especially, practice.

Therefore, the aim of the article is to overview social work practices as a ground for modeling Positive Social Work (PSW).

1. Theoretical study: From positive psychology to positive social work

From positive psychology the positive approach has been spread to other scientific fields, for instance to organizational studies and leadership research (see e.g. Cameron, 2008; Syväjärvi & Kesti, 2012). Thus positive psychology suggests aiming towards client’s future and positive aspects of his experience, strengths, and resources. Today positive psychology serves as an umbrella term for many scientific branches and thus could perfectly accommodate for social work by investigating positive emotions and other positive aspects such as creativity, optimism, resi-

lience, empathy, compassion, humor, and life satisfaction. Such focus on strengths and resources may be promising way to support people at risk situation (Schrang et al., 2014).

It is highly interesting, why clearly defined or modeled positive tradition is still lacking in social work research as well as in the ways social work knowledge is applied to social work practices. Social work from its origin relates to social support and as such it could, in principal, provide the ground for even stronger positive approach within social work. However, the lack of positive approach may be due to historically determined position of social work in the hierarchy of social sciences. Simultaneously, the phenomena attributed to the field of social work has been shown and defined. Related to the fields of sociology, psychology, social policy, social pedagogy and social anthropology, social work has been clearly positioned in the margins where it's set to deal with person-related social problems on individual, community and societal levels. The main task of social work evolved into finding the solutions to often individually specified life challenges of people living in varied vulnerable life situations. Encountering vulnerable people in harsh life situations is not the most fruitful baseline for the systematic creation of positive approach to social work phenomena. Quite the opposite, as it was argued above, participating in the everyday problem-oriented processes, social workers are at risk of professional narrowing into the negativity. Moreover, this narrowing can be furtherly intensified by the domination of medical model present in other branches of help-providing activities. Varažinskienė (2009) states that while providing social help, social workers act in various levels of society, they not only work with individuals and groups, but also act as makers of social policy.

It is noticeable that the majority of discussed research in social work are conducted within the problem-based tradition. Either it is individual, group or social policy approach. Researchers in their analysis often pose a question "What is the main issue?" which also steers toward a problem-based approach. Marshall & Marshall (2012) state that problem-based approach is ineffective because the client lacks motivation and hope. Such attitude taken instead of helping is labeling and deviant. There is a great need nowadays to shift our look from problem-based social work to strength-based Positive Social Work (PSW). Chapin and Cox (2001) write that "the strength perspective posits that the strength and resources of people and their environment rather than their problems and pathologies should be the central focus of the helping process in social work". Such strength in social work practice place emphasis on individuals' inner and environmental strengths. Strength perspective or positive social work can be described as final departure for social work from traditional medical and rehabilitative models of practice (Schatz, Flagler, 2004).

Kreiviniene and Vaiciuliene write (2011) that students at the universities and colleges could be taught to focus on problems rather than solutions. Their research (2011) brought to the light that students not only have knowledge about the priority spheres for change of representations towards people with disabilities, but also creative strategies for practical implementation. Students during the research not only actively participated in general discussions but also were seeking new, advanced methods for anchoring valuable role of person with disability in social life. Therefore this study allows to talk about new creative generation of social workers. Gevorgianiene and Fargion (2012) write about new generation of social work and new thinking with entrepreneurial abilities. Social worker nowadays must be creative as a businessman. Creative social work means going away from being “social bureaucrat”. It means thinking, seeking and working in the positive direction, social worker must “create the decisions” as far the world is too complex that decisions would already exist here.

The very same theoretical implication is found in Seligman’s (2010, p. 232–233) ideas that historically psychology also experienced attachment towards learned helplessness, as people who experience uncontrollable bad events become passive, not trying to do anything about their future. The major question in such situation should be: what makes these people’s immune from helplessness? It was learned optimism. When the strength is chosen instead of pathology, there opens a space for situational optimism. Saleebey (2013), Schatz & Flager (2004) write that positive social work means “to be guided first and foremost by a profound awareness of and respect for client’s positive attributes and abilities, talents, resources, and aspirations” (p. 6). Therefore, positive social work is a supplement to what social work traditionally does. Social workers should be just as concerned with making lives of people fulfilling as they are with solving problems (Seligman, 2010, p. 233).

2. Positive approach in social work: why orientation matters?

Studies about the identity of social work in Lithuania and Finland suggest that social work is represented with the emphasis put rather on “work” than “social” (Perttula, et al., 2009; Väänänen, et al., 2009). Similar notions can be found in the works of foreign authors as well. For example, R. Blundo (2013) states that there is a growing necessity to shift the main emphasis in social work from “work” to “social” as this would bring the profession to its roots of social activities and social reforms. These are valuable empirical findings for modeling positive social work, too. It implies that the realistic starting point for positive social work would be the area of practice, which is dominated by different versions of problem-oriented

approach. Despite the certain advantages, problem-oriented practice has its focus firstly fixed on troubles. Therefore, the logical way to start developing positive social work is to transform the orientation of social work practice from problems towards possibilities.

Solution-oriented social work practice, as mentioned above, first of all means a shift in thinking. Everyday social situations encountered by social worker are no longer conceived as dilemmas to be solved but as factual life situations encapsulating not just problems but also something else which is rarely looked at, namely the potentials and strengths. Thus, shifting the focus from problems to possibilities also includes significant change in placing time perspective of client life. In problem-oriented social work the emphasis lies on the present and how it has been shaped by the past life history. In solution-based approach the attention is paid towards the evolution of life in the future. Even though theoretical and conceptual sources for modeling positive social work are rather fragmented – for instance client strengths-based and empowerment-oriented conceptualizations in social work – it can be assumed that, despite domination of problem-oriented approach, in everyday social work practice there can be found plenty of examples of employing positive orientation. Therefore, it is a long run is to establish well substantiated theoretical model of positive social work by investigating the wide sample of current social work practices in various fields that can be interpreted as positive-oriented possibilities.

Another aspect speaking of social work in Lithuania more as of “work” than “social” is simplicity. Comparison research made by Perttula et. al. (2009) revealed that there is a difference in social work studies at universities and practice. Social workers in Finland apply theoretical framework gained at universities to their everyday work, thus social work is understood as complex “social” work. While in Lithuania social workers rely less on theoretical knowledge gained in universities, they rather automatically take-over the routines and models already established in certain agencies thus simplifying the process and reducing social work only to “work”. The same theoretical ideas are given by Staniulienė (2012), when she speaks of a need to see social work as net-working. She argues that nowadays social work does not utilize networks or uses them insufficiently. Such use of networks can be beneficial as it allows social workers to cooperate, use possibilities of synergy, etc. In such work with social systems social worker withholds a position of central coordinator where complex competencies are needed, such as coordination, teamworking, management, motivation, leadership and etc.

Recent research (for example, Leliūgienė, Pielikytė, Kaušilienė, 2011; Kreivinienė, Perttula, 2012) reveal that practical orientation of positive social work is problematic because of limited functions of social work. For example, research

made in the rural community (Leliugienė, Pielikyte, Kausiliene, 2011) revealed that obstacles for successful social work are: community not motivated for change, where people with disabilities are just service users and they do not become equal members of society (they are satisfied getting service and benefits), lack of other professionals in the region. This often leads to the situations when social worker is left the only helping specialist, therefore possibilities to organize support are limited, networking is impossible, resources are scarce (for example, social worker must share his office with other specialists, and clients are not willing to reveal details of their situation or talk about their problems when unauthorized persons take part and no space is left for the confidentiality). Therefore, social work is simplified and reduced into just organizing of services and benefits for the clients.

3. Motivating De-Motivated: Nowadays Reality of Social Worker

Positive social work approach has never been explored in Lithuanian context, therefore it is questionable if professionals are able to easily shift the traditional problem-based thinking into solution-based direction. Whatever the difficulty of adapting new attitude, it will inevitably add up to an already substantial amount of stressors in social work context.

There is a substantial literature, showing that social work is a profession inducing quite a lot of stress. For example, Gvaldaitė and Švedaitė (2005) state, that social worker is often engaged in activities which are not done by any other professional and therefore he has to come up with original ideas and solutions. Furthermore, the support and solution to a problem are often sought for in collaboration with unmotivated client (Anthony, Cohen, Farkas, 1998). On a regular basis social worker encounters the process of desadaptation of a client when it's necessary to recreate person's social skills, assist in finding appropriate social services, reintegrate a client into society. However, as it was mentioned earlier, social worker quite often is left the only support for a depressed client without personal documents and belongings, without social skills, facing financial struggles, with lost social and family ties, experiencing loneliness and homelessness (Petrauskienė, Daunoraitė, 2009). Overall in such contexts social work process can seem like a never ending battle which social worker fights for the “unfavorable” client in the society and each achievement can easily drop back again into previous level or even lower. Unsurprisingly this might bring a lot of stress for social worker.

Similar findings were revealed in Kreiviniene and Mickuviene's (2011) research investigating stress prevalence among social workers with people having mental disorders. All (110) social workers participating in the research were divided into two groups: working with people with mental disorders and working

with people with other social risks. The results were compared in these groups. Research results revealed that stress prevalence in social work practice was rather common. Research results showed that the same volume of physical symptoms was experienced by social workers in practice with all social risk groups, while greater volume of psychical symptoms was experienced only by social workers in practice with people having mental disorders. Social workers in practice with people having mental disorders more often experienced fear, constant tension, depression, desperation than social workers working with other social risk groups. These findings confirmed the results of researchers that social workers with people having mental disorders more often face physical and emotional burnout and higher stress prevalence at workplace. The most stressing factors in general were mentioned as follows: aggression from clients, too high responsibility for the clients, being in constant noise, negative society's attitude towards the profession. Statistically strain felt by social workers is above the average. This research also revealed that no complex social work competencies were needed in their practical work, and social work was simplified to "work" such as organizing leisure work for people (every day the same), taking care of people ("observation"), nursing, and etc. Therefore, social workers were often feeling fatigue, stress, demotivation, and seeing no future perspectives.

The research made by Kreiviniene and Perttula (2011) revealed that social worker as professional not only needs to organize support for clients (family raising child with complex disability) but also convince families of his/her professionalism, because all the participants of qualitative research doubted "what social worker can do? – nothing, he is just a social worker". Therefore, families tend to seek all support they needed by themselves. Therefore, social worker must find the way of keeping a leader position in seeking social justice and finding social support for the unfavorable clients. This could be very difficult, as discussed circumstances can trap the professional into motivation and de-motivation circle where it is easy to lose not only the positive orientation but the goals of support process as well. Also close contact with client may lead to professional burnout and dissatisfaction of professional life.

The amount of help for social workers in stressful situations is also insufficient, especially within agencies. Dirgeliene, Veckiene (2009) write that social work is a complex activity and the results are barely prognosable. Their research about social work stress prevalence revealed a great need of supervision in the organizations. The authors conclude that there are problems related with collaboration inside the organizations, and social workers receive support for work-related issues mainly from the family members, while their colleagues lie second, and the executive staff take only the 4th place. So, this is not just social work approaches which create

negative orientation in social work. Stressful work conditions and poor society’s recognition significantly add to this situation.

4. When Positive Break Starts: Steps Towards New Paradigm

Modern society is a constantly changing society therefore one could hardly expect to reach an unruffled and stable period in professional life. Especially this applies to social workers. Social workers encounter various dilemmas or situations without a clear solution on everyday basis. Uncertainty has become a constant feature of their professional activity. Undoubtedly, this serves as a source of additional stress. Thus, the only possible way to deal with this type of stress is to adopt a new perspective towards social work, based on critical thinking, positively oriented and focused on client’s strengths and social supports.

Complexity of modern society results in a growing complexity of social work and social problems (see: Adams et al., 2009). The diversity and depth of social problems, range of social worker’s roles, need for wider inter-professional arrangements is constantly expanding. These processes require complex thinking from a social worker. Social work in such circumstances subsequently has to develop from being just “action” (or “work” as mentioned above) to becoming a reflective, critical thinking-based activity, involving practical skills, knowledge, values, thoughts and emotions. As R. Adams et. al. (2002, 2009), puts it, social work is no longer a simple choice between two (usually negative) options, it is a search for alternative solutions based on inclusive and critical thinking.

Problem-oriented social work approach is rooted in worldviews, which see reality as consisting of rules, laws and expectations closed to any interpretations (Pardeck, Murphy, Choi, 1994) and pertaining to the linear thinking of one cause – one outcome. However, today’s social reality becomes an object open for interpretation and description, therefore positively-oriented social worker and client instead of sticking to standard roles should create their own critically thought-over discourse for cooperation. Thus, to avoid sinking into ever stressful situation, it’s helpful to adopt an attitude of uncertainty and complexity based on wider cognition of client’s context (or the “social” component of social work), and understanding that social worker cannot control the results of intervention, he can only give the initial impulse.

As it was argued above, positive orientation means a paradigm shift for social workers. Emphasis on “work” component and linear thinking created a model where client’s needs were thought to be objectively measured and similar interventions were expected to bring similar results. However, current reality brought in complex situations which are multicausal and multifinal and cannot be approached

by unified procedures or methods. As W. Kisthardt (2013, p. 54) argues, social workers encounter the increasing necessity not to just choose an appropriate service for a client but to assess the possible results of these services. Market ideology wants to see the concrete benefits of spent resources. Several studies, reviewed by R. Blundo (2013, p. 39–40), reveal that no particular technique or model is superior to another and they are responsible only to less than 15 % of the positive outcome. What brings significant results is the cooperation and relationship between social worker and client. Positive social work approach just exactly advocates for the importance of worker – client relationship. Attention to client's strengths, enhancement of client's social supports, focusing more on conversational skills than interviewing skills, showing the intentions to listen and not make negative judgments, being sensitive to cultural and contextual features are among those factors which might help to establish a collaborative relationship.

Client strengths perspective in general means a turn from problem thinking towards assessing the ability to survive despite pains and hardships. All this cannot be done without understanding the complexity and individuality of client's situation and evaluation of a wider context. To achieve this, positive social work approach encourages social workers to get involved in research, i. e. to fill the gap which is left open by social workers in Lithuania as noticed above in the article. Social work research should not scare social workers as it is a natural part of the profession. Social workers write reports, conclusions, make analysis, comparisons on everyday basis. However, if done with conscious understanding of its purpose and while critically thinking, research could serve social worker as a counterbalance for institutional routines and significantly enrich social work practice.

Problem-oriented social work approach implies that the dominant source of support provision is social worker. Social work interventions seek to change and influence the nearest environment of a client to achieve a desired outcome. Although relatives and members of client informal network might be involved into process of help, they remain secondary actors to a dominant role of a social worker and other professionals. In this case, positive social work approach offers to apply a social support intervention instead. Social support paradigm pays the main attention to an informal family system, relatives, friends who become the primary actors. Social worker and other professionals has to settle for a secondary role. The basic aim of a social worker in this case is to help an informal network to support the client and supply professional interventions if needed. Informal support is naturally available and consistent with cultural traditions of assistance and help. Moreover, the identification, involvement and strengthening of an informal network brings an additional dimension to client's social context widening it from domestic – material level to interpersonal and community level.

To round up what is discussed above, a graphic model highlighting the main features of traditional and positive social work approaches is presented in the Figure 1. The model follows the established description of a social work process, which defines three interconnected components – social worker, client and environment. The proposed shifts between traditional and positive approaches, described in the article, are presented within each of the components. Figure 1 presents the basic features of so-called “traditional” social work and expanded, positive orientated social work.

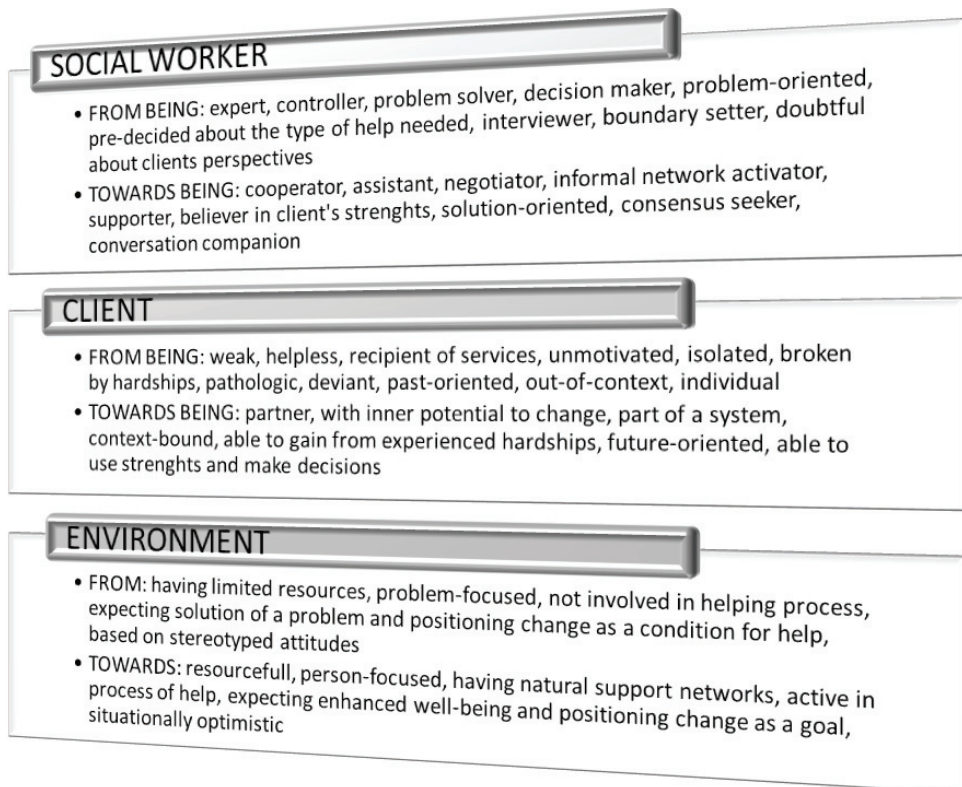


Figure 1. The proposed shifts between traditional and positive social work approaches (Kreiviniene, Rimkus; adapted from Seligman, 2010; Kisthardt, 2013)

Conclusions

Social work can be described as uncontrollable, in constant change and at risk. Therefore, social work is understood as dynamic, mobile and with various risks. Professionally social workers experience huge variety of negative emotional reactions, like anger, avoiding, stress (leading to burnouts) because of aggression,

negative attitude, unclearness of professional boundaries, complex disability of clients, lack of skills and knowledge. Therefore, social workers are not satisfied with their professional situation, results of work and evaluation of work (Lazutka et al., 2008). Therefore, conceptualizing positive social work in Lithuanian context and this theoretical implication is a first trial substantially needed deeper analysis in praxis.

Though research results (Kiaunyte, Ruskus, 2010) reveal that emotions not always bipolar (negative – positive) but are intermediate, conflicts are followed by positive and negative emotions. Such intermediate emotions are often related with general climate in organization, relations with colleagues, clients and head. However, positive social work approach allow to use these challenges for professional growth and strengthening professional identity.

Even though theoretical and conceptual sources for modeling positive social work are only fragmentary – for instance strength-based and empowerment-oriented conceptualizations in social work – it can be assumed that in concrete social work practices you can find even rich examples of how positive orientation may be realized in social work. This theoretical insight is in a long run is to establish well argument theoretical model of positive social work by investigating the wide sample of current social work practices in varied fields that can be interpreted as future-oriented possibilities.

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