Social Work with Older Aged People in the City Environment
Opinions of professionals and decision makers
(Result of research SGS1/FSS/2010: Social services in post-industrial society. The example of the City of Ostrava, Environment area)

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Abstract: This paper will discuss problems of differences in perception of environment of the city by older aged people and social workers, or other city decision makers. It is based on research which took place in the city of Ostrava during spring and summer 2010, and results into many findings that can help to improve social work in a city environment. This problematic can be very important not only for future improvement of cooperation between social workers, and the old, aged people, but also for all city decision makers, who want to make their city more friendly to old aged people, and who currently base their decisions about older people on narrow knowledge of their own specialization.

1. Social work with older aged people, perspectives for future

Social work as a profession has always worked with many groups of people. Older aged people were amongst them, from the very beginning of this profession. Social workers strived to improve living conditions, health care and well-being of older aged people by many means, but mostly, by giving them money, and supporting them by social services. This type of care used to be sufficient, but now, major changes are awaiting social work in this field.

First of all, were economical changes. In the Czech Republic, there is insufficient numbers of social workers, when one social worker can have more than 100 clients. Economical crisis led to a political decision to lower wages in all state-paid employments, but most of the social workers are now state-employed. This, in combination with law on social services (108/2006 Di.) which specifies a social worker only as person with college or university education (§ 110, law 108/2006 Di.) who can expect to be well paid, may in future lead to even greater insufficiency of social workers in Czech Republic.

Expected demographic changes will at the same time probably lead to increasing numbers of older aged people, while some of them may need social services. At this time, it may be important for social work, to find resources which can help older aged people to maintain their autonomy for as long as possible, without needing social workers assistance.

One of the main resources of autonomy for older aged people may be the environment they live in.

"...adaptive person: environment exchanges support and release human potential and growth, health and satisfaction."[1]

Social work accepted the importance of environment for its clients in the sixties, when Germain and Gitterman (2008) introduced their ecological perspective in social work. I believe (in accordance with Greene 2008; Queiro-Tajalli or Smith, 1998), that ecological perspectives can be used nowadays, to provide social workers' assistance to older people.

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[1] Germain & Gitterman. 2008, p 54

For example in the book "Social work with the aged and their families" Roberta Greene writes about ecological perspective in social work: *"The social worker examines all pertinent systems, affecting the older adult´s functional capacity, including health care systems, religious institutions and neighbourhood networks. Though such a multisystem assessment, social workers can better learn, what resources may strengthen the older adult and his or her family."[2]*

It is certain that space/physical environment, where people live, can be one of such resources. It is because: *"the ecological perspective views the person as a dynamic entity in constant interaction with the environment. Although accommodation may occur in this process, changes also may occur both in the individual and the environment."[3]*

2. Research on social work with older aged people in the city environment amongst professionals and decision makers

While bearing in mind the ecological perspective of social work, because:

"the ecological perspective provides a holistic view of the person in the constant interaction with his or her environment,"[4] I would like to introduce in this article some of the main results of the research, that took place in the city of Ostrava (Czech Republic), during the year 2010, and now is finishing. The research worked with a term: "physical environment of city" and examined its meaning for social workers and decision makers, while this physical environment may be one of the resources, that can help older people to cope with any difficulties they may meet. We have used qualitative research strategy, with techniques of dialogue and document analysis, to be able to answer some very important questions. For example:

- Do professionals see any changes in the physical environment of the city?
- And if so, how do they view these changes in their relation to older aged people living in the city? (Do the changes support older aged people, or do they limit their autonomy?)
- What strategies do they see, to create environment "friendly" to old aged people? (Term is taken from the document of WHO: Global age friendly cities: A Guide[5])
- What experiences professionals have with strategies of older people in their relation to the physical environment?
- Do professionals reflect importance of "getting old in the environment" circumstances and results of relocation in the older age?

This research was important not only for answering these questions, but as well for the reason of identifying physical environment of the city as one of the possible resources that can help old aged people maintain their autonomy. Social workers and other decision makers should be aware of this function of environment, so they can avoid a possible crisis of social services in the future.

The research resulted in many findings and while some of them were predictable, others were much more unexpected. In the next part of this article, I would like to introduce at least some of them.

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[2] Greene. 2008, p 17
[3] Queiro-Tajalli, Smith. 1998, p 201
[4] Queiro-Tajalli, Smith. 1998, p 200
[5] Global age friendly cities: A Guide. 2009. Geneve: WHO. Accesible on:
<http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_guide/en/index.html>

2.1 Life of old aged people in the city environment

The first part of the research was concerned with how social workers and other decision-makers assess cities as a whole and city of Ostrava specifically as a place, where old aged people live. They have specified a great number of both positive and negative aspects of living in a city.

Amongst the **positives** were:

- Physical accessibility of public transport, culture, medical care, family and shopping (It is important to ask, if these places are all kinds of space that older people need or want to visit.)
- Better access to social and health care services and greater possibility of choice.
- More options for active aging (free time activities, culture, sports)

Amongst the **negatives** the most important were:

- City environment is not optimized for older people (full of physical obstructions, for example holes in streets, and with necessity to travel with public transport to distant parts of city.)
- In comparison with countryside, the city was seen as less integrative for older people (Their families, are for the most time, are gone for work, their neighbours are not interested in helping or they don´t know them, seniors need much more institutional help, than in the countryside.)

As the most important factor of the physical environment of the city were named barriers. Barrier free environment equipped with lifts and close to services was seen as ideal for older people. Under such requirements, we can as well see, that social workers and decision makers still aim their attention mostly on older people, who need medical help, are limited in their movement by poor health and can be put into the same "box" with disabled people. Especially decision makers from the municipality had often the opinion that any action of the city made for disabled people, will be good for older people as well and vice-versa.

Not only physical environment was mentioned by our respondents, when we asked them about "friendly city." Very often we have heard that friendly city is created by friendly inhabitants, that people are those who only can create friendlier environment for older people. The problem, our respondents were talking about, without directly naming it, was **ageism**. They have seen nowadays cities as places created mostly for younger people with very quick lifestyle, who like travelling by car and using modern technologies. For example they have spoken about modernisation of public transport, where special switches were added for opening doors of the vehicle. Older people often had problem to understand how to use the switch, and missed their station. Another example may be public telephone boxes, which used to be almost over every corner. With the era of cell phones, these boxes were taken away, but older people often don´t have a cell phone. This can cause them big problems.

2.2 Aspects of the city

In the next part of the research we showed our respondents a table, with different aspects of the physical environment of the city, which may be important for older people. Among them were:

- Outdoor environment, such as sidewalks, streets, parks, and other places
- Public buildings
- Shops, services and cultural facilities
- Means of transport

We asked our respondents to specify how these aspects of the city should look in the city friendly to older people, and how do they asses them in Ostrava. The problem we have met with this question was that most of our respondents answered only   the part of how they assess the city of Ostrava, and not how the situation should look.

Outdoor environment was seen as ideal for older people, when containing parks with benches. These places should mainly serve as places for relaxation of older people. In Ostrava outdoor environment was criticised for vandalism, which is one of the reasons, why there are not enough benches outdoors. Also crosswalks were often mentioned here. They are seen as dangerous for older people, when they have no light signalization. In many cases, outdoor environment of Ostrava was criticised for its barriers, again from the point of view of older people, who are limited in their mobility or disabled.

Public buildings in Ostrava were rated much better, than its outdoor environment. While our respondents understood this question mostly as if we were asking about the building they work in, they have answered us, that public buildings, especially new ones, are well accustomed for older people, because they have benches, wide corridors, lifts and no physical barriers. Only few respondents have mentioned a reception as an important place for older people, where they can ask for a way to place they are looking for.

Shops, services and cultural facilities in Ostrava were rated very differently. In shops, respondents appreciated that they are barrier-free, it is easy for people to orientate within and some have discount actions for older people. (For example a shop with optics, which gave a discount as many percent as old you are on a new glasses)

On the other hand services were understood as three great groups of it:

- Everyday services, such as banks, hairdressers and so on, which our respondents did not really talk about
- Social services
- Health care services

The last two types of services were seen as very important to older people. But while social services were rated highly, as professional and helpful to older people, great problems were identified in the relationship between older people and providers of health care services. Criticised were especially manifestations of ageism, such as reluctance of doctors to accept older people as new patients and visit them in their homes, when they are not able to come to the medical attendance. As an example, I can introduce expression of one respondent:

"Well, in hundred percent it (Ostrava) *is behind still in solving such special ambulances. It is insolvable problem. And in hundred percent it is behind in an approach of practical doctors. It doesn´t work just like, if the senior can´t come to the doctor, so the doctor comes to senior. This is how it should work in this system, but there are about 3 doctors in the whole of Ostrava, who fulfil this obligation, and I know, those who do, they do it 150%. But the rest don't and this is a question for the city, how it will deal with this. It isn't done yet. About emergency services, especially emergency services, the health care lags behind in this, when there is that high age, no one will part for him in help, diagnostics..."* [6]

On the other hand means of transport, namely public transport in Ostrava, was prized highly because of its cheapness (it is even free for people older than 70 years), reliability and being barrier-free. In this, we can see, how older people are viewed by social workers and decision makers as a group of people, who not only have a limited mobility, but also need to travel cheaply, because of the low income they have. That is probably why no other kinds of

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[6] Environment 19, row 182-191

transport (for example cars, trains or plains) were mentioned, when speaking about travelling and older people; as if most of them never leave the city.

We can presume that there were two main criteria for the respondents, which they used to decide whether the city is or isn't friendly for older people. The first was the existence or absence of **physical barriers**, which suggests, that older people often have mobility problems. The second criteria are **interpersonal relationships**, goodwill of people and respect for older people. From the importance given to this criteria we can say, that the respondents have seen demonstrations of ageism in Ostrava and disagree with this situation.

2.3 Places where older people live

Another part of the research was about the environment, where older people live. It was interesting to see how the respondents defined places that were good and not so good for living as older people.

- **Town districts with the characteristics of the countryside** were assessed as very good, because of strong family and neighbour ties, which helps the older people who can't take care of themselves. On the other hand social workers from practice pointed out the poor accessibility of social services in such places, which implies the question, whether the family or neighbour care is here just because of the tradition or better morale of local people, or if the reason may not be hidden in having no other opportunity.
- **The inner city** (in the meaning of the high density built-up area of the city) had also its strong sides. Mostly were mentioned services, culture and health care, which are from these localities much more easily accessible, than from the outer parts of the city. Also the offerings of social services are much wider in the inner city, than elsewhere.
- **Blocks of flats** are one of the very common types of houses in Ostrava. They are built from concrete panels and our respondents have seen these as one of the worst places for living in as older people. These flats usually do not look very good and aren't placed in an attractive environment. On the other hand, they are usually equipped with lifts, are in many cases barrier free and very close to all the places mentioned above, which are considered to be important for older people. (Shops, culture, health care, services). It is interesting then, that the respondents considered older housing made of bricks to be much better places for living in as older people. These houses are usually placed in much greener and older parts of a city, but they have no lifts and if older people are seen as those who have problems with dealing with such barriers, we have to ask ourselves, what is more important for social workers and decision makers? Barriers or a nice place to live?

We can conclude this section   by stating that most social workers and the other decision makers were convinced that older people prefer   living places that are nice, quiet and placed in greener areas. They also prefer it when care for them is provided by family or neighbours, which is better fulfilled in country areas, than in the inner city.

2.4 Resume

From the above mentioned we can say that older aged people are seen by social workers and decision makers in Ostrava as:

- People with poor health, especially mobility problems (they need barrier-free environments)
- People who must confront ageism in their everyday life (interpersonal relationships should be improved)

- People with very low income (they need to buy in sales, travel by public transport for free)
- People endangered by isolation (getting older people out of isolation was often mentioned as one of the tasks for social work)
- Those who prefer quiet places with parks and benches away from busy places full of people
- People who can't use modern technology and orientate themselves easily in a changing environment.

Most of these are stereotypical views of older people and are not supported by research findings   in this field. This knowledge will be used to spread more information to social workers and decision makers on how better evaluate needs of older people and which stereotypes do they need to avoid. Also it may help the decision makers to avoid some decisions about city property that could cause problems to older people in the future. And last but not least, social workers should be aware of the role that environment has in the lives of older people because this knowledge can help them to better understand how to use this environment as one of the resources for empowering older people and helping them to maintain or regain their autonomy.

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