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Adult social work in municipal social welfare offices in Finland

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of adult social work from the Finnish perspective. Attention is paid especially to the conceptual and functional context of social work among adults and the need for theoretical self-understanding in the field. The need for adult social work has contributed to structural and economic changes in society, the consequences of which are reflected in social work. In social work among adults, therefore, one also comes across clients whose choices are narrowed substantially and whose safety has been compromised. The developmental tasks of different life areas are associated with the life stages of adulthood, the reality of which is also reflected in social work among adults. In adulthood, losses can undermine all aspects of life related to security. Socio-cultural reality is a key factor when analyzing the quality of social work among adults. The organisational and legal limitations of adult social work have an impact on how the conceptual and functional content of the work is constructed. As a concept, adult social work is united by the idea that it consists of rehabilitative social work with adults of the legal age of majority. The service system oriented, therapeutic and social critical nature of the work is recognisable in the functions of adult social workers. Adult social work highlights awareness of professional ethics, methodological knowhow and readiness for social influence. Excessive workload, rushed and forced pace of the work and information overflow are stressors in adult social work. The development of adult social work as a field of social work is critically dependent on how its theoretical self-understanding is formed.

Keywords

Adult social work, social welfare offices; Finland

Introduction

In Finland, the necessity for more social work among adults has become more and more relevant not only with the internationalisation of economic and working life but also with the recurrence of economic crises. Changes in the community are rapid, and therefore, it is not possible to identify the change factors sufficiently. Cost-effectiveness, clear profit targets, and their monitoring are emphasized, for example, in working life, in the planning and implementation of welfare services, and in estimating the need for services.

The developmental needs of adult social work are especially focused in urban settlements, where, for example, economic difficulties, long-time unemployment, mental health and substance abuse problems, and multiple forms of deprivation, are highlighted as social problems (e.g. Jääskeläinen, 2005; Karjalainen, 2007; Välimäki, 2008). Social assistance plays an important role in the Finnish adult social work. Studies on adult social work have also been performed on the inequality related to poverty, the poverty of families, the poverty of single women and men, and the poverty of the elderly (e.g. Nummela, 2011; Forssén et al. 2012). The experiences of foreign countries show also that poverty is connected with factors of gen-

der, aging and migration. Women have been found to have a higher risk of poverty than men (Zaidi, 2006). Among slightly older women, the causes include a short work history, caring for close relatives, and medical costs (Butler, 2006). Immigrants and the unemployed also have a high risk of poverty (Veall, 2008).

In the Finnish welfare system the concepts of adult social work and basic social work are especially connected with the social work done in municipal social welfare offices, mainly with income support and the work done among various marginal groups. Social work in child welfare has, instead, become its own special field of expertise within the social work done in social welfare offices, and it has been easier to find qualified social workers in this field than in adult social work. The spectrum of social threats to personal welfare faced in adult social work is complex. Some adult social work clients are young adults who have just reached the age of 18 years, but for a number of reasons, the decisions to help these clients seek vocational training and employment are deferred. For young adults in Western countries, the phase of becoming independent is generally prolonged and has become individualized and more unstable (Jokinen and Juhila, 2008; Nummela, 2011; Kankainen, 2012).

The difficulties in life management appear in the various manifestations in adult social work. Adult social workers face families with children who have no need for child welfare services, but have become income support clients, for example, due to general life management difficulties. People who are in need of social assistance form the core client group of adult social work. To a great extent, adult social work is left bearing the responsibility of supporting challenging client groups, such as people suffering from mental health problems and addictions, as well as service coordination and multi-professional cooperation (e.g. Walhbeck, 2007; Jokinen and Juhila, 2008; Payne, 2009).

Preventive welfare services, including adult social work, are under ever more pressure. Health promotion focuses on the active action of risk group members, where the idea of partnerships is central. For example, various communities, organisations, and volunteer workers play an active role in creating and implementing structures that promote inclusion. Inclusion promotion is connected with the actions of various forums and interest groups that enable adults to help plan regarding issues that concern them and also engage in other types of cooperation with the administration (Fairhurst et al., 2011). This illustrates also the nature of the Finnish system of adult social work aptly.

Practical knowledge of this article is based on research (Väistönen and Hääläinen, 2008), the empirical data for which were collected via an online questionnaire and a group interview with social workers in southeast Finland's municipal social welfare offices (75 social workers). The study was conducted in order to gather information on the contents and work forms of social work among adults and on professional skills, development needs, and workload factors. The knowledge base serves as a theoretical concept for social work among adults and provides research information on the quality of adult social work as a prevailing work practice. The additional data consisted of a 2010 group survey (open questions) that was directed at persons engaged in adult social work in three cities in southeast Finland. The survey sought information on the contents of the service plan, on the developmental needs of adult social work methods, and on the challenges of the work. Percentage distributions were formed on the basis of the answers to the structured questions, and the responses to open questions and interview themes were processed using content analysis. In addition to this, some other Finnish studies relevant to the topic have been utilised.

Theoretical approach

Adulthood as a life stage

Adulthood, as a stage of the life of a human being, is a relatively long period in which the different developmental tasks in relation to the social system are significant. According to the lifespan theory (Erikson, 1982), a human being goes through eight psychosocial stages of development during his or her lifetime.

Attempts are being made to maintain a balance between, for example, intimacy and isolation. Finding oneself, coping with middle adulthood, and settling down into a calmer life are parts of the life stages of adulthood. At the same time, life is reassessed, for example, in relation to the cessation of economic livelihood and employment, as well as human relations and the structures of everyday life. ‘Generativity’, within the concept of adulthood, means providing prosperity and security to the younger generation. In relation to loved ones, generativity means taking care of other people and all the tasks surrounding them. Generativity also includes the social and cultural dimension, which occurs within the range of various future-related risk factors (e.g. Hoare, 2002).

Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) stress the importance of strengthening cultural identity and societal liability in adulthood life-stage changes. They talk about revolutionary intellectual activities involving strengthening individual identity and hope in life. The second turning point is changes in relationships with a person’s spouse, children, their parents, and friends. The third turning point is work, namely a change in the status of a person’s working life. Work has a crucial influence on the development and maintenance of human self-esteem. Therefore, a loss of work also has a deeper social significance. According to Hoare (2002), the self-image of an individual is constructed on the basis of the experiences he has had in his working life and as a social influencer in general.

The interaction between an adult individual and society is generally based on an individual’s own choices and decisions, some of which relate to family life and employment and also to economic survival. Adult social workers encounter clients whose choices are narrowed substantially and whose safety has been compromised. For example, a fast-paced job market has factors (for example, Calstel, 2007) that are of fundamental importance to human existence and self-security. On the other hand, threats to a person’s economic survival may lead to the blurring of that individual’s vision and direction in life. If the future is impossible to predict from an economic viewpoint, maintaining a general feeling of security and experiencing the meaningfulness of life may be associated with a variety of threats.

Adult development also involves substantial losses, which can undermine all aspects of life related to safety and midlife transitions (Levinson, 1986). Losses are related to loved ones and in particular to work, livelihood, privacy, and a safe environment. According to studies conducted on human security and insecurity (Niemelä, 2000, p. 360), those vulnerable to the fear of loss often belong to the 45–64 age group and also to the 65–74 age group. In addition, they also belong, to some extent, to the 35–44 and 75–84 age groups. Women are clearly more afraid of loss than men are.

The socio-cultural approach to adult social work entails linking an individual’s life course, life stages, and experiences to the historical and cultural context of society. Ageing is approached, therefore, as a social and cultural issue. Understandably, ageing is a growth process involving the comprehensive physical, psychological, and social changes in the whole life course, in which the constraints brought about by age and also the resources of age are taken into account.

Issues related to ageing begin as a result of the different stages and turning points in the life course of adulthood. In general, social ageing refers to the relationship between an ageing individual and his environment and society. Communal ageing is the effect that communal changes have on the status of the ageing population or the impact of the ageing population on various societal activities. Ageing, at a micro level, is understood to imply changes in individual or group status, performance, operational practices, roles, participation, and attitudes.

Different approaches to social work among adults

The definition of international social work (IFSW) emphasizes the cultural, historical, and social-economical circumstances to be taken into consideration. The goal of social work is to bring about an increase in welfare by means of promoting changes in the community, solving problems in human relationships, life management, and helping individuals to become more independent. In social work, the vital points are, for example, the principles of human rights and communal legitimacy, respect for human

value, improving the changeable and complicated relationships between individuals and their surroundings, and efforts to reduce poverty and to enhance the lives of disadvantaged and oppressed people. In different functional approaches of social work (Payne, 2005) which also can be adapted to social work among adults, the central elements of the international social work can be identified.

Interactivity is emphasized in adult social work, especially when the work is in accordance with the reflexive-therapeutic approach. Its theoretical grounds can be found, for example, in the psychodynamic and humanistic thinking and in the role and communication theories. Social work is psychosocial work, in which the therapeutic dimension is consciously recognized and the crisis stages or psychological, social, and financial problems of a client are not delimited beyond the work (e.g. Brown, 2009). The aim is to achieve a change in a client's way of thinking, actions, and resilience, which also means finding resources outside of that individual. Attention is paid to the interactive processes between people because it is believed that through interactions, people's abilities to control their lives and their resources are strengthened. Hence, a greater resilience to the challenges that they are facing is achieved (Payne, 2005; Howe, 2009).

Social criticism, as a feature of adult social work, can be identified when the emphasis is placed on influencing the economic-political power structures of the society. In that case, the perspective is a radical one and opposes oppression in the society (Payne, 2005; Pease, 2009). For example, different actions aimed at empowering social work clients express this kind of thinking (e.g. Adams, 2009). The concept of empowerment is an ambiguous one. The task of social work is to strengthen the life control abilities of those people who have, in one way or another, fallen into a subordinate position in society and thus to provide the prerequisites for taking actions in order to achieve a change and to claim their rights. Therefore, social work stands by the side of those in a subordinate position in order to defend them and to advocate for their interests. The definition of international social work is well-suited to adult social work because elements of a social-critical approach can be identified in both of them. According to this definition, social work is social enactment work aimed at increasing welfare, problem-solving work, and work enhancing people's capabilities to act.

The centrality of the service system to adult social work is emphasized when it is viewed as part of a bureaucratic social organization, and the principle of normality is stressed when providing the services. In that case, the aim of social work is to help clients so that the need for control and support through social work gradually disappears. This goal is often connected to the idea that it is possible to find resources for life management in a broader social context. The task-centred methods, as a methodological choice available within municipal adult social work, are emphasized when it is acted upon via an individualistic-reformist approach (e.g. Payne, 2005; Doel, 2009). Defining measures and their duration, implementation, and assessment involves task orientation. When a problem is being charted, goals are set that are planned or implemented, or actions are evaluated, questions such as what, when, who, where, why, and how are typical of the method.

Adult social work can also be characterized as empowering social work. Empowering social work means a work orientation advancing empowerment and aimed at creating change that is actualized on the individual, community, and societal levels (e.g. Linhorst, 2005; Adams, 2009). Tuusa (2005) has analyzed the concept of empowerment via three perspectives. Firstly, empowerment means a social operations model that catalyses, contributes to, and supports change in structures and immediate communities. In this case, adult social work means those actions taken through critical and reflexive work. Secondly, empowerment can be viewed as a change aimed at increasing interaction and cooperation between a client and a social worker. It is concentrated on the process of client work so that a client's empowerment is being supported. The aim is to reach a sense of individual control, a capacity to critically perceive the environment, and an awareness of the influences of one's own actions on the environment.

Empowering adult social work can also be characterized as socio-pedagogical work. Emphasis is also placed on strengthening self-education processes and assisting in self-help, strengthening life control and social integration, and bringing attention to the things in which people place their trust and hope. How individuals interpret their life situations and what kind of solutions they try to find in order to solve them are also stressed. The socio-cultural perspective, essential to the socio-pedagogical thinking, is emphasized in empowering adult social work (e.g. Kurki, 2007; Väistönen, 2007; Adams, 2009). It manifests itself, for example, via being aware of humans as cultural beings, understanding the meaning of the different phases of life, identifying social ageing, and also understanding people's everyday-life culture. A task of adult social work is, for example, to strengthen the visibility of different human cultural meanings and to enhance people's active participation. The principles of empowering social work are intellectual and operational equality, the centrality of resources, subjectivity, sovereignty, participation, and responsibility, as well as becoming aware of and respecting cultural differences. The aim is to prevent marginalization; to create, restore, and maintain prerequisites for independent resilience; to improve life control and quality of life; and to support independent choices.

Practical approach based on empiric results

Concept of adult social work

The research in the social welfare offices in southeast Finland showed that the conceptual analysis of adult social work remains on-going (Väistönen, and Hääläinen, 2008). However, the question is about work that aims to balance and remove factors that make the course of the lives of adults, i.e., over-18-year-old clients, difficult. Also, work among those families with children that do not have a need for child welfare services is defined as adult social work. The legislative background of adult social work has not yet been fully clarified, and its functions are also defined by factors connected with organizations and their operational culture.

A study by Nummela (2011) demonstrated that high unemployment and selective labour markets have increased the need for adult social work. The development of adult social work in municipalities took place in the late 1990s. As a concept and form of work, adult social work has been specifically defined in the 21st century.

Character and methods of adult social work

In Finland, adult social work appears as a type of work demanding special interactive abilities and the social workers in the field seem to be target-oriented and quite versatile methodologically (Väistönen and Hääläinen, 2008). On this basis, adult social work can be characterized as individual work and as multi-professional work, as well as partly as work among networks and multi-cultural social work (see also Brown, 2009; Adams, 2009; Doel, 2009).

Social work plays an increasingly central role (Sipilä, 2011) in ensuring citizens' legal protection. Social workers have ample societal knowledge, particularly of people's living conditions and social problems. They also have a great deal of so-called tacit knowledge, which is an integral part of the know-how that social workers use in encounters with their clients, in interpreting problems, and in planning appropriate solutions to the clients' situations with those clients. The societal mechanisms that guide adult social work, however, are not always (Kankainen, 2012) in line with the professional and ethical premises of social work. The societal role and operational capabilities of social work still remain partly open as well.

The study by Väisänen and Hämäläinen (2008) demonstrated that the forms of work in adult social work that involves strengthening individual resources are dialogic, psychosocial, socio-pedagogical, and empowerment-related. They are more commonly used than the forms of work that strengthen communal resources, i.e., structural work and community work. The actors in adult social work are aware of the methods used in adult social work and their development needs. These work forms were also emphasised in Sipilä's (2011) research.

Adult social workers are able to define their work and its methodological alternatives despite various limiting conditions. Structural social work can be based on the systematic knowledge creation born out of client work, which enables social work to start a social-political discussion regarding the living conditions of the citizens in the most vulnerable positions. Adult social work is always closely linked with society. It is built through those joint practices in which social workers, clients, and the operational environment influence one another (see also Payne, 2005; Kankainen, 2012). The client groups of adult social work are generally challenging, and such clients are not always aware of their rights. The service system does not make the clients' rights adequately known (Nummela, 2011). The recognition of various value configurations and the significance of ethical principles are particularly highlighted in adult social work when there are a great deal of expectations related to the efficiency and effectiveness of the work (Banks, 2006).

The development of adult social work requires the strengthening of case management and service coordination, the development and embedding of electronic services, and other forms of work that support client inclusion. Adult social work consists of similar elements in different municipalities, but its methods vary to some extent. Adult social work enables the development of forms of work that respect professional and ethical premises, promote client inclusion, and strengthen the prerequisites for client-driven work (Nummela, 2011; Blomgren and Kivipelto 2010; Kankainen 2012).

Central client groups in adult social work

People with financial troubles or those experiencing some other kind of a difficult life situation, such as having dependencies and mental health problems or a criminal background, are the primary clients of adult social work. The simultaneous manifestation of many different social problems is common among the primary clients of adult social work. Providing guidance regarding services and assisting the unemployed, as well as providing information about social problems, sources of help for them, and the allocation of supplementary benefits, are emphasized as being the most important tasks of adult social work.

Over the past few years, the proportion of young clients in adult social work has become increasingly significant. Particularly significant are those young clients who fall on the border of child protection and adult social work. Adult social work is demanding because it has a large spectrum of tasks and responsibilities regarding moral fairness for clients, employers, and society. Some adult social work clients also suffer from mental health problems. In recent years, research has focused on questions related to the mental health of the elderly in particular. This has highlighted the significance of social support and social networks as factors that uphold mental health (e.g. Banks, 2006; Cumming and Kropf, 2011).

Adult social work mostly focuses on a client's life management and livelihood, but phenomena related to unemployment, intoxicant use, and addiction are frequently the focus of the work as well (Blomgren and Kivipelto, 2010). According to Nummela (2011), 'clientship' in adult social work has several dimensions. Object clientship is manifested when the social worker defines the clientship through the client's problems. The encounters between social workers and clients also include elements of consumer clientship and service clientship.

Professional skills

The central fields of expertise needed in adult social work are skills used in meeting a client, a common social and social work knowledge base, and a professional ethical consciousness. A social worker's conception of clients and of himself/herself in relation to the clients is central in situations in which difficult-to-access social problems are encountered. Special know-how is needed in adult social work, so maintaining expertise requires an opportunity to participate in continuing education. The central factors in increasing professional completion are a higher academic degree and length of experience. Problems regarding professional skills usually stem from a lack of education or resource allocation in adult social work. An academic education in social work, the updating of professional skills, reflecting upon one's own work, and discussions with colleagues improve expertise in adult social work.

Social workers believe (Sipilä, 2011) that their most important skill is to act as a neutral expert who identifies problem situations. This requires goal-oriented problem-solving skills, the ability to apply legislation, and being able to assess the work. Also significant are skills regarding emotional work, particularly emotion management. Adult social work is demanding because it has a large spectrum of tasks and responsibilities related to moral fairness, clients, employers, and society (Banks 2006). It requires critical thinking to reasonably balance a wide variety of questions in relation to the time available. Adult social work begs the question of what is the basis and content of human worth and how the clients' well-being, as a goal of the work, is constructed (e.g. Blennberg, 2005).

The problems of clienthood are seen as border conditions that limit adult social work. Adult social workers are forced to work within a field of conflicting expectations because they are simultaneously expected to provide cost-savings and fix the client's affairs (Nummela, 2011). The ethical awareness is a key principle in social work. Social workers considered the key principle of action in the realisation of fairness and equality, which highlights opposition to violence and discrimination. In terms of realising the client's rights, what is central is the creation of a confidential client relationship, equal treatment, and positive encounters between the client and the social worker. Encountering the client in a humane way also means genuinely listening to the client and respecting their individuality and autonomy (Sipilä, 2011; Nummela, 2011).

Stress factors of adult social work

A too-heavy workload, rushed work, and frantic work pace are stress-loading factors in adult social work. The load inflicted by insufficient support and loneliness/isolation, as well as unsatisfactory work arrangements and a poor atmosphere, is less than the load inflicted by the amount and quality of work. When speaking of the load inflicted by the demands of work, the load incurred due to the flow of information and troublesome clients is important. Other stress-loading factors include a low salary and a low level of appreciation for the profession. Adult social workers are aware of both the threats to and the facilitators of workplace well-being.

Information on the threats to workplace well-being can be used in adult social work to both prevent problems and solve them in the long run. Adult social workers also have a fairly good chance to exert an influence on their own workplace well-being, but less of a chance to influence broader societal structures. Bureaucracy and commercialization of services challenge the social work professionalism. The strengthening of professionalism requires combining value know-how with information and skill know-how (Sipilä, 2011; Kankainen, 2012). The main threats to the future of welfare work are hardening attitudes and deepening societal deprivation. A results-based societal culture that emphasises economic efficiency and hardening values is seen as a contrary phenomenon to social work, which respects human dignity (Sipilä, 2011).

The need for theoretical self-understanding in adult social work

The development of adult social work as a field of social work is vitally dependent on its theoretical self-understanding. Research-based knowledge about prevailing practices provides a basis for the develop-

ment of the theoretical self-understanding of the field, but its central theoretical content cannot be directly concluded from empirical research-based knowledge. The problem of the reconciliation of theory and practice is encountered in all kinds of social work. The question is not only about the tension between the facts of what the work is in practice and what it should be in theory but also about from which starting points and how the theoretical self-understanding of the field is being built.

Regarding theory and practice, the problem is an old one and concerns other fields of human-related work. From the perspective of research, it has principally been approached in two ways: (1) by researching the prevailing practices and deriving theoretical conclusions from them that characterize the field and (2) by using other qualifiers than the prevailing practices as starting points for theory building. The former approach can be called a descriptive one because through it, a theoretical description of the field is created based upon what its prevailing practices are like. However, analyzing social work theoretically through non-empirical qualifiers does not necessarily mean setting normative measures.

Information gained about the practices of adult social work being carried out in municipal social welfare offices shows that the field remains, both conceptually and functionally, partly unclear and that the practices are strongly formed via legislative and organizational boundary conditions. There is also variation, to some extent, in the ways of organizing the work, as well as in the workers' views on the nature of the work. The workers' views on what kind of expertise is needed in adult social work and how the field can be developed express the theoretical self-understanding prevailing in the field. Professional ethical consciousness, methodological expertise, and a willingness to influence socially are emphasized within it. A relatively large numbers of workers emphasized providing information about social problems and highlighting the backgrounds of social problems as being the central tasks of a social worker in adult social work.

When interpreting findings, it is of note that organizational and legislative boundary conditions influence how the conceptual and functional content of the work formed. In some other operational environments, adult social work could possibly be organized in another way. When viewed according to the course-of-life model, the adult social work in municipal social welfare offices is defined as being located in the middle ground between social work in child welfare and the social work in the field of gerontology. However, a definition based only on age does not provide the theoretical self-understanding needed. The division of the services into those for children and families with children and also into adult social work services, as well as naming adult social work a field concerning adult clients that are not clients in child welfare, is mainly an administrative one.

In the social work literature, there are several examples of efforts to conceptually analyze social work, to take forward the field theoretically, and to create conceptual systems that are suited to it. In Finland, a conception of this kind has been created by Louhelainen (1985), Raunio (2004), Toikko (2005), and Juutilainen (2006), who have developed conceptual structures that theoretically analyze the nature of social work from various starting points. These structures are of great help in interpreting the prevailing practices and in creating definitions of what characterizes them. The conceptualizations help in reflecting upon the prevailing practice and help to identify its characteristic features. Thus, they also build the theoretical self-understanding of the field. As a result of these considerations, we will now set out general description of what seems to characterize adult social work by using the Finnish analyses mentioned above.

From the descriptions of those working in adult social work, it can be identified by the service system-centred, therapeutic, and social critical nature of the work. Thus, these theoretical orientations of social work, represented by Raunio (2004), all describe adult social work. It is not surprising that the service system-centred orientation is emphasized in municipal social work, but it is noteworthy that the social workers also strongly stressed the psychosocial nature of the work and the social-critical nature of work. In the characterizations of the knowledge basis of the work, knowledge of the service system, the need for psychological knowledge, understanding the different phases of an individual's lifecycle and different ways of life, and the knowledge needed to analyse social reality were important. The central nature of the

service system is expressed via those tasks that adult social workers have assessed as being the most important ones, namely guidance within services, assisting unemployed people, and allocating supplementary benefit.

Adult social workers' descriptions of their work and of the expertise needed for it include elements of different theoretical interpretations concerning the relationship between a client and a worker. According to Juhila (2006), this fact, whether emphasis when meeting the client is put on a relationship based on attachment and control, partnership, care, or interaction, expresses a different view of the nature of social work and its social task. In the views of adult social workers on their work, a relationship based on interaction and partnership was emphasized, but characterizations expressing a relationship based both on attachment, control, and care also came up. Based on the workers' descriptions, adult social work can be considered to be work that advances the clients' participation and strengthens individual and communal resources. Questions relating to dependency, autonomy, and mutual responsibility are emphasized, especially when working with people in difficult life situations and people with addictions and mental health problems.

According to Toikko (2005), social work has historically been analysed through the traditions of administrative actions, communal development work, and personal interaction. Each of these three traditions is found in the descriptions of the workers, so it can be stated that adult social work practices include elements from all of them. In Finland, social work is, in accordance with the law, a part of municipal services, and thus, it inevitably includes administrative arrangements. However, adult social work is not reduced to merely administrative work. It also includes elements of pedagogic-therapeutic and communal influencing. The organizational and administrative boundary conditions do not leave much space for a communal alteration work, but the workers expressed a clear need to develop the work in this direction. In the descriptions characterizing the work, some of the workers highlighted empowerment work, socio-pedagogic work, community work, and structural social work and connected the idea of strengthening individuals and communal resources with them.

As interactive work, adult social work shares conceptual and functional starting points with psychosocial client work. According to Juhila (2006) the interactive building of reality, different questions regarding identities and preconditions for clienthood, gradually developing expertise from one situation to another, and ethical consciousness are examples connected to a relationship that is based on interaction (see also Howe, 2009). These are also found in the workers' descriptions, but it is to be remarked that the workers do not perceive their work in terms of the concept of therapy, which Louhelainen (1985), Raunio (2004), and Toikko (2005) use broadly when characterizing the interactive working method. In any case, adult social work in the field is defined as interactive work in which human relations skills, social situational awareness, and an ability to have open-minded encounters with people are professional standards for the workers.

Adult social work can also be characterized as bureaucratic work when it is mainly defined by organizational and legislative conditions and when the work being done is considerably dependent on various documents. Essentially, bureaucratic work has to do with social control, which is viewed as being a characteristic of the social work carried out in social welfare offices (Mäntysaari, 1991). However, in social services, bureaucratic work is considered to be fundamental (e.g. Sipilä, 1989), for example, to the equal and just treatment of clients. The bureaucratic aspect of the work and the centrality of the service system are highlighted in the theoretical self-understanding of adult social work based on the workers' descriptions, but they are not the exclusive definers of adult social work. Based on the workers' descriptions, adult social work is altogether extensive and varied by nature, which makes its theoretical analysis especially challenging.

Conclusion

The article looked for information on how adult social work is constructed as a concept and as action, and also analysed the need for theoretical self-understanding in adult social work. The knowledge formation for the article was based on a study whose empirical data was gathered from social workers engaged in adult social work in Southeast Finland. The need for adult social work has grown as society has become more varied, as unemployment has continued and as life management problems have become more difficult.

The organisational and legal limitations of adult social work have an impact on how the conceptual and functional content of the work is constructed. As a concept, adult social work is united by the idea that it consists of rehabilitative social work with adults of the legal age of majority. The legal background of adult social work is varied, and the work is conducted in vastly differing operational environments. The social problems being faced in adult social work are demanding. They include financial difficulties, mental health problems, addictions and crime.

As interactive work, adult social work is connected with the conceptual and functional premises of psychosocial client work. The methodological orientation of the work highlights work forms which strengthen individual resources, for example, psychosocial and dialogical work and empowerment strengthening. Service system orientation is demonstrated by the tasks that adult social workers estimate as the most important: service guidance, activating unemployed people and granting social assistance.

The workers' views on what type of expertise is required in adult social work and how the field can be developed further showcase the theoretical self-understanding prevalent in the field. The service system oriented, therapeutic and social-critical nature of the work is recognisable in the depictions of adult social workers. Adult social work highlights awareness of professional ethics, methodological know-how and readiness for social influence. Excessive workload, having a very rushed, forced pace of the work and information overflow are stressors in adult social work. The development of adult social work as a field of social work is critically dependent on how its theoretical self-understanding is formed.

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