SYSTEM THEORIES OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

Systems theories provide an important framework for understanding and applying concepts in social work. Their holistic approach to the study of interactions, relationships and dynamics within social structures provides a deep understanding of the complexity of human interaction and the environment in which that interaction takes place.

Today, as social work encounters diverse and often complex problems, systems theories are becoming a key tool for effectively understanding and addressing these situations. These theories allow us to see social phenomena as part of a larger whole where the elements - individuals, groups, communities - are interconnected and influence each other.

Systems theories in social work are not only about looking at systems as such, but also at their internal dynamics, interrelationships and interactions. Concepts such as systems boundaries, feedback loops, hierarchies of organization and adaptability are key to understanding how social systems shape, change and influence the lives of individuals and communities.

Systemic theories of social work

Systems theories have played a major role in the historical development of philosophy, sociology, and the natural sciences. They have suggested and stimulated, albeit in an undeveloped form, many of the problems raised by contemporary science. Today, systems concepts are at the centre of scientific interest not only in the natural and technical sciences but also in the social sciences. It is therefore necessary to give them adequate attention commensurate with their increasing importance, argued Puršová (1984).

Systems theory focuses on the study of the complex relationships between the parts of a social system and the ways in which these parts interact and influence each other. This theory is often concerned with the analysis of social structures, relationships and dynamics between

individuals, groups or organizations. It looks at the ways in which these parts work together and contribute to the overall functioning of the system.

Štefan Strieženec (2001, p. 46) generally states that "once communication occurs between people, social systems emerge, opening up the requirement of purposefulness in "everyday life" and the "lifeworld", the communication of the individual with the macrosystem (society)." He goes on to argue that the systems approach respects that the functionality of systems is in the fulfillment of human needs and interests (systems are for people) and on this basis human rights, culture and ethics need to be developed with respect for the developmental tendency of systems.

Introduction to systems theories

The culmination of the professional debate in the world concerning the question of the scientificity of social work was in the 1960s-1970s. "Authors holding the view that social work is only an applied form of scientific knowledge, as well as authors fighting for the acceptance of social work as a separate scientific discipline, sought to prove that social work action is based on scientific principles and methods, that social work has from its beginning sought to apply scientific principles" (Hollstein-Brinkmann, 2001, p. 7). It was as a result of this debate that a range of social work theories were developed.

Although the development of systems thinking can be conceptualised differently according to different authors, there are nevertheless some distinct turning points. The development of systems thinking is often explained as a counter-current to the high number of highly specialised disciplines (Hollstein-Brikmann, 2001). Staubmann (Shubrt, 2007, p. 8) breaks down the development of systems theorizing into the following three stages:

- The first stage goes back to the beginning of the modern period, it is connected with the opposition of "part and whole" (in sociology this was manifested, for example, in the work of E. Durkheim),

- The second stage adheres to the concept of "part and whole", but the key to it is the distinction between "system and environment". This concept is elaborated by T. Parsons. At the beginning of his research he is joined by N. Luhmann,

- The third stage is recorded from the late 1970s onwards, when a shift can be seen in Luhmann's work. The differentiation "system and environment" still remains fundamental, but is less and less important. Due to the impact of new knowledge, especially in the field of cognitive biology, social systems are characterized as "autopoietic", meaning self-generating systems.

- Systems theory has its roots in the biological and physical sciences. The Austrian biologist Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who presented the so-called general systems theory in the 1940s, made a significant contribution to the development of systems theory. "His theory serves as a connecting bridge between research in the various scientific disciplines. Its use is thus also adequate in the social sciences" (Matoušek et al., 2013, p. 37) .

 "Bertalanffy calls this tradition of thinking, that is, systems thinking about the whole and the results of new scientific developments General System Theory - General System Theory" (Hollstein-Brinkmann, 2001, p. 17). Bertalanffy's general systems theory finds its application primarily in those social sciences that present a holistic approach.

This general systems theory a distinctive and relatively unified stream of scientific thought. It is dominated by an attempt to build a conception of the system based on general principles. These principles are valid for all spheres of objective reality, and thus for society. "These theories abstract from the qualitative distinctiveness of particular concrete systems and processes, inorganic, organic, and seek the most general regularities valid for these different forms of the movement of matter.

They move from generalization and abstraction to the application of systemic principles to concrete objects in order to verify and refine the premises. They have a supradisciplinary character" (Puršová, 1984, p.189).

Systems theory deals with people who are left with unmet biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs in their social, ecological, and cultural environments. This is often the reason that leads to the escalation of social problems. It also deals with the study of social problems such as poverty, unemploymenť, crime, delinquency, social exclusion, etc.. It also highlights the contradiction in the relationship between social control and assistance.

The main themes are the knowledge, description and explanation of the functioning of individuals in their ecological, social and cultural environmenť, then their needs, constraints, and socio-structural barriers. The importance and place of social work as a profession in society, the clientele, the competencies of social workers, the field of work, ideals and ethics are important.

Hollstein-Brinkmann (2001) argues that by using systems theory as a precise model theory, social phenomena can be characterized. As a result, systems theory, according to Hollstein-Brinkmann (2001, p. 15), seeks integrated principles that are general in order to be applied in diverse contexts, both physical, biological, psychological, and social. As a result, systems

theory is "represented in a variety of scientific fields such as philosophy, engineering, organizational counseling, therapy, and social work. Thus, one cannot speak of a unified systems theory."

Systems theory must be understood as one integrative pursuit, a service of different scientific disciplines that foregrounds the structural similarities of its subject matter. (Hollstein-Brinkmann, 2001) In contrast to the analytic approach, systems thinking aims to treat complexity as least reductionistically as possible (Mátel, Hardy, 2013, p. 57). Systems theory is based on four subsystems:

1. the social subsystem,
2. the culture subsystem,
3. the personality subsystem,
4. the behavioral subsystem of the organism (Nákonečný, 2005).

Definition of the basic concepts of systems theory

To better understand systems theories in social work, it is crucial to define and understand basic concepts such as system, systems thinking, boundaries and feedback, and others. These concepts form the basic skeleton for the analysis and application of systems principles in a social work context.

System is the fundamental concept that this theory operates with. System as a word comes from the ancient Greek (system). It denotes a whole composed of parts, a formation, a creation, or an assembly (Ludewig, 2011). According to Ludewig (ibid.), the meaning of the word system is most aptly expressed by the German word Gebilde, which refers to a system as a complex unit made up of components whose description is limited to the sum of their properties as a whole and must express a description of the elements and their understanding. In this sense, Ludewig speaks of a system as a unit delimited from its environment, consisting of elements and their relations.

Hall and Fagen's definition of a system is: "A system is a group of objects linked by relationships between the objects and between their attributes," Objects can be animate or inanimate (Hollstein - Brinkmann, 2001, p. 17). At the core of Bertalanffy's conception was "the notion of the organism as a holistic organized system. He emphasized above all the organization on which the procedural aspect depends. (Puršová, 1984, p. 190) According to Bertalanffy, who defined an organism as a mostly dynamic open system, as opposed to systems that are closed. (Ibid)

He defined a system as "a set of interrelated elements" and differentiated systems according to their relationship to their environment into types of systems:

- Closed systems - systems in which there is no connection to the surrounding environment, they are fully isolated, self-evolving,
- Open systems - systems in which information flows out and in through the permeable boundaries of the system. This characteristic allows it to change and evolve. Interaction with the environment occurs, with the environment acting on the system and the system acting on the environment. An example of such a system is the family (Brnula et al., 2015).

Systems thinking is primarily concerned with the feedback mechanisms that take place within open systems. Systems processes are characterized by circular causality, which is the opposite of linear causality. Linear causality describes a process where one event evokes another (Barker, 2010 In Brnula et al, 2015).

An important idea based on systems theory is the idea of relationships between systems, subsystems and suprasystems. For example, suprasystems in this context of the family are considered to be the extended family, neighbors, the community within a residential neighborhood, etc.

 Subsystems can be thought of as groups made up of individuals or groups of individuals that make up, for example, a parental, marital, or sibling subsystem.

Boundaries - the role of boundaries is to protect the integrity of the system as well as the functional independence of its individual parts. Boundaries can be physical, visible, or emotional, allowing for control of emotional interaction, closeness, and connection. The boundaries of a system are made up of functions. They separate and at the same time connect the unit with its environment, regulating the structural connection between the system and the environment (Ludewig, 2011). Similar reasoning applies to boundaries between systems and suprasystems. In terms of strength and permeability, we divide boundaries into:

- **Rigid and impermeable** - in this case, the family is isolated from the social space in which it lives,
- **Permeable** - the family may be overly receptive to changes that are taking place in the wider environment. Hence, events within the system will be largely subject to events in its surroundings.

- **Semi-permeable** - it is considered optimal for an open system to function, i.e. 'some events will pass through the boundaries, but the system protects the boundaries from others.

Feedback - is the way a system responds to the behavior of its individual elements. It is a system feedback that feeds output data about the behavior of the system back to the input. Positive feedback is a system response in which the returning part of the output causes an increase in the input. Conversely, the goal of negative feedback is to cause a decrease in the input (Brnula et al., 2015).

Humans as a system whose basic function is to satisfy its own needs (in addition to biological needs such as food, drink, air, and sleep). The quantity and hierarchy of needs are determined by the internal makeup of the system, so the same need may be dominant in one person and secondary in another. Then there are the basic needs - physical, sensory, bodily integrity and inviolability, sexual, emotional, diversity of orientation in the environment, clear rules and social norms, originality, freedom and autonomy, social recognition, social belonging, meaningful goals and motivation, balance between giving and taking.

Human life from the perspective of systems theory - it is a cycle that consists of the realization of satisfying one's own needs and fulfilling one's own desires. This can lead him to conflict with other people, so he must seek a solution that does not conflict with the interests of others.

Values - valued needs that have taken on greater importance for the individual or society. People give these values to needs from the perspective of society as a whole but also vice versa. They thereby come to construct social norms and help the functioning of social system.

Individual and social values - understood as determinants in systems theory. Basic values on both sides: individual freedom, justice, mutual aid, social exchange. All contribute to social equilibrium (homeostasis). Systems theory of social work examines the causes of its violation and the possibilities of its restoration (Konečný, 2007).

Overview of system-therapeutic models

Different authors present different subdivisions of the directions and schools of family therapy. Among the systemic schools of family therapy we include: the communicative direction, the structural direction, the strategic direction and the experiential-humanistic direction.

Communication Direction - The communication direction is primarily concerned with the family communication system and the interactions between the members of the family system. It is concerned with the study of "the mode of communication, the distribution of power, the pathological interaction games in which family members use manipulations to achieve their goals" (Prevendárová, 2000 In Brnula et al., 2015) .Hence, the central theme of communication approaches is the identification of communication problems and their correction.

The five axioms according to Watzlawick et al. (1999):

1. **It is impossible not to communicate** - all kinds of behavior that someone perceives have a meaning. Even a person who sits quietly is communicating to his environment at least the information that he does not want to talk to others.

2. **The content and relational aspect of communication** - communication has a relational aspect in addition to its substantive content. It can be identified by the choice of words, but also by the way they are spoken. The second axiom explains that the same content can be communicated in different ways, in which the relations between the communicators are legible, but also the distribution of roles and power. The relational aspect of communication is embodied in non-verbal communication, tone of voice.

3. **Digital and analogue communication** - Digital i.e. verbal communication, is used to encode our intention into information using words. Analog i.e. non-verbal communication which conveys information vicariously and needs to be decoded. The division of communication into digital and analogue is a matter of a rather didactic nature. They function as a single unit.

4. **Symmetrical and complementary interactions** - reflects the relationships between communicators. Symmetrical communication speaks of equal status of partners in communication. Complementary interaction takes place on the basis of an imbalanced relationship between the communicators. Flexibility between them is necessary and desirable. In healthy relationships, there tends to be permeability between different kinds of interactions that change depending on the circumstances.

5. **Interpunctuation of communication processes** - according to Watzlawick, the nature of relationships depends on the flow of information exchange between communicating partners. Both the sender and the receiver of a message, perceive the information flow differently and therefore tend to consider their behavior as a reaction to the incoming stimulus from the other. This axiom refers to the phasing of communication, saying that in interaction it is not always clear what is a stimulus and what is a response.

Structural direction - the founder of this direction is Salvador Minuchin. Structurally oriented family therapy and counseling is based on normative ideas about the functioning of a functional family. He sees the source of problems in the existing structure of relationships, in unresolved roles, poorly arranged boundaries between generations or subsystems of the family. The problem may also arise as a result of inappropriate distribution of power among family members, but also as a result of too loose ties between them. Work with families is aimed at analysing and restructuring relationships, changes in positions and roles, power shifts, uncovering and eliminating pathological ties, and creating a new scenario of family life (Brnula et al, 2015).

The family consists of a set of individualities between which constant interactions take place. These repeated patterns of family interactions form the family structure. The family structure thus becomes a set of rules that reflect the interrelationships, position and hierarchy of power among family members (Prevendárová, 2001).

Within the family structure, there are subsystems which, as carriers of certain family functions, satisfy the specific needs of its individual members. These subsystems are dynamic, flexible and in constant evolution. Dysfunction in a subsystem affects the other subsystems and causes them to malfunction. In a functional family, the organisational elements of the system are clearly structured; dysfunctional families, on the other hand, are characterised by a rigid, diffuse or chaotic structure. There are boundaries between subsystems that determine the degree of permeability, accessibility and contact.

The therapeutic work of Minuchin's model aims to replace dysfunctional structures with functional ones with optimal permeability of boundaries and a clear hierarchy of responsibility that belongs to parents and children within their subsystem (Brnula et al, 2015).

Strategic Direction - Jay Haley is considered to be a key representative of Strategic Direction. The role of strategically oriented therapy is to identify pathological mechanisms and plan a strategy for solving problems, life situations of the family. In order for a family to cope with life situation and problems, it needs a series of effective strategies. These strategies will be taught to them by a strategic family therapist. Haley, in working with the family, assumes the family's resistance and defense to changes that would upset the pathological equilibrium that has been achieved. The strategic therapist uses a variety of manipulations and strategies to deal with this resistance, the goal of which is to make the defense impossible. Two basic issues are significant for the strategic therapist:

1.   How does the symptom help the family maintain equilibrium or overcome the crisis?

2.   How can the symptom be replaced by a more effective solution to the problem?

This direction assumes that problems in the family are cyclical in nature. They always arise from the same stimulus and recur according to the same script. The symptoms identified by the client (recurrent quarrels...) maintain the pathological homeostasis and become certain points in the cycle. The family is stuck in this cycle and cannot find a way out. The therapist's role is to recognize these recurrent pathological symptoms and plan a strategy to break the cyclical nature (Prevendárová, 2001).

The experiential - humanistic direction - is associated with the name of Virginia Satir, who was based on the belief that communication disorders, which contribute to the dysfunction of the family system, originate from the personal immaturity of family members and are linked to a failure of self-assessment and evaluation of others. The member with disturbed self-esteem seeks validation of his or her "self" in the family. He or she cannot accept that even those closest to him or her are different in their views and wishes. He experiences such difference as a danger, threatening his personal integrity, and enters into a rigid communicative role in response to his sense of threat.

Satirová (2006) In Brnula et al, 2015 identified four supporting aspects of family life:

1.The feelings and beliefs one has about oneself, which he or she refers to as self-esteem,

2.The ways that people use to communicate with each other and which she calls communication,

3.The rules that people follow in their feelings and actions, which eventually evolve into something called the family system,

4.The way people behave toward other people and institutions outside the family, which he calls the social bond.

The difference between systemic and systemic theory

Systems and systemic theory in social work are two different approaches that are dedicated to the study and understanding of social systems and the interactions within these systems. The difference between systems and systemic conceptions lies in the perception of the system. While systems theories understand a system as a truly existing entity that has subsystems, rules and boundaries and maintains its own equilibrium that can be influenced by interventions from outside. The systemic conception has abandoned the notion of homeostasis and sees the system as a matter closed off from the environment, with internal changes occurring that are

unpredictable, unplanned, and cannot be controlled by external interventions (Kratochvíl, 2006, p. 44).

While systems theory focuses on relationships and interactions in social systems, systems theory is more concerned with specific methods and practices in social work.

It should be emphasized that the terms 'systems theory' and systems theory' can be used in different contexts with different meanings, which may depend on where they are applied. For example, in the field of social work, these terms are often used in the context of specific approaches and frameworks. Systems and systemic theory also differ in their focus and approach to analysing and solving social problems.

The fundamental difference between the systemic and systemic schools of family therapy lies in the emphasis on the influence of the observer on the object of observation and the resulting change in the therapist's role. The role of the therapist has changed from that of an expert, to that of a participating observer, in which the therapist co-creates the conditions for change to occur. "The therapist, together with the family, explores how the views of individual family members differ and what meanings they attach to symptoms. The fact that each person has a different view of the world - and therefore a different view of the problem - is reflected upon by the therapist and used in the therapeutic process. At the same time, the therapist also takes into account his or her role as a participant observer" (Vymětal, 2000, p.241).

Both of these theories can be used in social work as tools to better understand and solve complex social problems, each offering its own perspective and approach to solving these problems. The systems can work together and complement each other because a systems approach can be implemented based on an understanding of the systemic relationships and dynamics within social systems.

Conclusion

As a discipline, social work is enriched by a variety of perspectives and theoretical frameworks that provide insights for understanding and solving complex social problems. Exploring a systems and systematic approach in social work has allowed us to view the discipline from different angles.

In the present study, we examined a major approach in social work - systems theory. Our goal was to understand how this theory contributes to our ability to analyze and solve complex social problems through structured perspectives on interactions and interactions in social systems.

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