

Postmodern Openings

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Relevant Factors in Research Activity of Ukrainian Social Workers: Postmodern Studies

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Abstract: The article deals with theoretical, practical, partly - historical aspects of scientific research of modern Ukrainian and foreign sociologists and social workers.

The aim of the research is to analyze and summarize the following three key aspects: a) historical destructive moments in the development of Ukrainian/Soviet sociology; b) the orientation of the vector of postmodernist research of foreign scholars who had no censorship restrictions on their works; c) the main problematics of current Ukrainian sociological research. The latter, despite their deep materialistic tradition, find opportunities for new non-empirical approaches. In the article with the help of analysis of methodical sources, generalization of their content and presentation and interpretation of individual statistical data the authors substantiate: socio-economic, managerial and pedagogical reasons can systematically present the problematics of the current research of social workers. However, the postmodern aspect, still not "reworked" by the Ukrainian society, has not yet left its final mark on the social research.

The international significance of the article lies in the interest of countries of transitional democracies and economies, previously under totalitarian influence, to acquire full emancipation and neo-liberalization concerning social problems and humane ways of solving them.

Keywords: *social work; research activity; social support strategies; technologies; groups of factors; socio-economic transformations.*

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Introduction

To begin with, research activity connects the theory and practice of social work. Being essential for developing theoretical knowledge, it implies the optimization of forms and methods of social work. Social research aims to address the problems complicating the social life of an individual or a group of individuals, study human needs for particular services, as well as objectively assess social workers' activity and the efficiency of certain social projects and programmes. At the same time, it is social workers who greatly contribute to elaborating theoretical aspects of social work. Social workers use extensive factual material, which should be summarized and disseminated in scientific and professional spheres. It follows that social workers must have profound knowledge of social problems, be able to offer possible solutions to them and skillfully use research methods and data processing techniques. Thus, social work training should involve individual-subjective, individual-axiological and reflexive practice, introduced during the postmodern era. Unfortunately, Ukrainian sociology has not yet undergone such a positive reconstruction.

Scientific knowledge about society has not always been associated with empirical research. Besides, social support, work and management are separated from theories explaining social phenomena on the macro- or micro-level. This theory relies on the fundamentals of ancient philosophy with its first attempts to explain how the social system works. It took several centuries before researchers began to apply experimental methods to solve social problems, previously treated as abstract, which led to the emergence of social research (Fisher & Dybicz, 1999; Špiláčková, 2012; Sheremet et al., 2019).

In Ukraine, social research was first initiated in the format of a population census in the early 18th century. Its narrow specialization did not allow one to provide all the essential data about different groups of the population, given that the true aim of such research was tax control. Only in the late 18th century, statistics workers and mathematicians were involved in the interpretation of the data obtained. Vernadsky (1995) as the first representative of the national "descriptive" statistic trend is considered to have laid the foundation of the complex economic-statistic description of the country's life. In the early 20th century, it was journalists, doctors and economists who began to apply statistic techniques in their empirical studies on the key challenges of that time (poverty, heavy drinking, suicide). In the context of today's methodology, such studies were far from ideal due to

small samplings, ambiguous criteria and questions of surveys and poor formulation of findings.

Research relevance. Social research became rather significant in the 1920s-30s. It was mostly associated with the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the Institute for Demography, Kharkiv Research Institute for Pedagogy and the All-Ukrainian Institute for Labour, located in Kharkiv. During the 1930s-50s, Ukrainian sociology was fully isolated from world science; there was a shortage of factual data; Soviet authorities banned numerous studies. The renaissance of sociology and research practice occurred only in the 1960s. After Ukraine gained its independence, new research institutions, including the Institute for Sociology, Ukrainian Institute for Social Research after Yaremenko, Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, were founded. Today, they rationally combine theoretical and methodological research with wide-scale empirical studies. Besides, they hold annual all-Ukrainian polls to monitor the dynamics of social indicators in Ukraine's development (Shulha, 2000).

Owing to the long-lasting, negative economic and socio-political situation in Ukraine, which until recently was part of the USSR, it is essential to analyze the factors calling the response from social services agencies and requiring a new research approach. Even though Ukraine has already entered the post-truth era, it has not reconsidered the European postmodern experience yet. This creates diversity and, quite often, the eclecticism of ideas and social approaches.

The international relevance of this article is determined by the results of the global socio-economic crisis of 2007-2008, which increased the credibility of postmodern social approaches. Their main thesis is social maturity, subjectivity and involvement of each member of society opens new sociological perspectives, individual research practices and cultural performances that now seem more important than the production-economic sphere (Bowden, 2018).

The article is relevant to both post-Soviet regions and developed countries, which need to study the causes of the sociocultural crisis of the postmodern period. The article logically continues the attempts of scholars to find out the influence of sociocultural paradigms and metatheories on the research and practice of social workers (Gumenyuk, Palchynska, Herchanivska, Kozak & Kobyzhcha, 2021).

The indisputable factor that makes the scientific and research activity (SRA) of social workers relevant is the need to implement the research component in practical social work with an individual client and segmented

groups of clients. Already at this stage qualitatively empirical research begins, in the course of which the specialist analyzes the client's life path, supplementing it with a biographical view of the situation. The longitudinal nature of research is embodied through various monitors that provide long-term and continuous observation of the client's development and change. The concept of interaction that predetermines the client's subjective position, his vision of life, the world around him, allows to develop a scientifically grounded approach to his worldview, which in the process of work provides an effective solution of the social problem. At the same time, according to the authors, it is the total social involvement that has emerged in people with postmodern experience - to observe and explore social characters as a phenomenon of God's diversity in the world - that gives significant relevance to our topic.

The purpose of the theoretical article is threefold. It consists in achieving theoretical generalizations in three directions: a) summarizing the specific historical stages of development of social work in Ukraine in the conditions of dictate - and transition to civil society (see Introduction and third section); b) reviewing the works of foreign social science theorists of late postmodernism (see next section); c) analyzing the array of theoretical and statistical data of Ukrainian authors and revealing the real trends of sociological scientific and experimental work (SEW). This triune goal can be formulated as follows: "Research of socially vulnerable factors by Ukrainian scientists in a transitional society".

Research methods include summarization and analysis (mostly), as well as statistical methods and their interpretation through the prism of the authors' social, political, cultural and other knowledge of the Ukrainian society (partially).

Importantly, the authors of the article claim that it is possible to classify and interpret social problems (factors) within the framework of the threefold (socio-economic, management-related, pedagogical) classification with the help of analysis and summarization and, thus, show their impact on further research in this area.

Postmodern and Recent Social Research

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, it became relevant to analyze the methodological legacy of postmodernism. At the same time, the synthesis of postmodernism and social science was often considered to be either impossible or too complex (Alvesson, 2002). Research shifted to a reflective reevaluation of social phenomena, as well as of social and cultural

contexts. However, the main problem was the very nature of postmodernism: both problematic and critical. Pondering on postmodern prospects of current social research (Alvesson, 2002) considers a self-aware approach to be the main one. Given that sociology is fundamentally anthropocentric, its achievements cannot be destroyed by individual carriers of post-modern consciousness. According to Alvesson (2002), “ideally any form of evaluation or critique of social research should incorporate an analysis of the self-awareness of the research and its interpretations” (p. 3). An ambitious objective of Alvesson (2002) lies in his attempt to combine postmodern theory and social research. He fails, though, by his own admission.

Before viewing postmodernism as an autonomous tool of human sciences, one must remember that it was preceded by numerous critical discourses and the global struggle for social justice. This led to the recognition of human capabilities and modalities, in which the main social values were legitimacy, neoliberalism and individuality. Lather considered postmodernism as “a shift from the conjunction of liberal humanism with positivistic science to a conjunction of de-centered subjectivity and multi-sited agency within a postparadigmatic diaspora” (Lather, 1990, p. 64). However, the researcher later concluded that a postmodern approach towards culture and sociology could have significant consequences under the legitimacy of such “new knowledge”.

Today’s researchers, who are already familiar with the experience of their predecessors, understand the limits of postmodern theory in social research. Dickens & Fontana (2015) believe this theory to be relevant to semiotics, ethnography, critical deconstruction and feminism. The authors of this article assume, however, that semiotics and feminism are the important components of crucial societal drivers. Consequently, postmodernism can be a rather useful tool of social research.

Even though postmodernism was frequently described “as dealing a death-blow to sociology” (Owen, 1997), sociology and postmodernism have something in common in terms of an anthropological identity. Owen (1997) located “the identity of sociology “after” postmodernism as a contested site which opens up the possibility of re-imagining the enterprise of sociology”. Thus, even in the late 1990s, one could observe certain critical but positive changes in sociology.

At the same time, it is essential to distinguish between epistemological and empirical forms of postmodernism in today’s sociology. As noted by Mirchandani (2005), in the late 1990s, sociologists managed to standardize and master the tools of epistemological postmodernism, which

is why sociological knowledge became recognized as variable and relative. In the 2000s, they were “forced” to develop and implement research programmes “based on new concepts like time-space reorganization, risk society, consumer capitalism, and postmodern ethics” (Mirchandani, 2005). It may be assumed that researchers “pay tribute” to postmodernism. However, one must admit that postmodernism has significantly expanded approaches to social groups and the world as a whole. Therefore, the creation of new sociological epistemes through epistemological and subsequent empirical approaches leads to “the new sociology” (the authors’ term).

King (1998) also singled out epistemological and empirical forms of postmodernism. At the same time, he noted that the departure from hyperrealism had made postmodernism more practical and sensitive to social changes. Thus, the critique of hyperrealism has greatly reinforced postmodern trends in sociology. The hyperreality, embedded in pioneering research on postmodernism in the late 1990s, was already seen as a metaphysical category, and postmodernism itself became more practical at the level of any member of society.

Nowadays, social research is almost inseparable from social services, which indicates the utmost syncretism of industries. This is a consequence of postmodern holism in the humanities and related sciences. Another feature is educational research on both global and local (regional) social problems with clearly defined social groups (Grady et al., 2018). In general, social practice, personal experience and research work constitute a single project.

In Western Europe and the USA, theoretical-methodical work concerns two aspects, namely, developing methodical tools for sociological theorists and slightly other tools for sociological practitioners (Kerlinger, 1964; Alston, 2018; Faulkner & Faulkner, 2018).

Today, researchers mostly rely on information available online. Unfortunately, such data are frequently inaccurate, and there is no direct emotional connection with respondents (Mishna et al., 2021). It is expected that shortly, Ukrainian researchers should prefer online surveys to direct contact with respondents. This is especially true when holding a population census.

The priority social factors on the example of Ukraine

It must be noted that theoretical-methodical approaches and social work concepts (psychodynamic, humanistic and behavioural approaches;

conflict and systems theories) determine the need to apply the tools of scientific research.

A detailed analysis of social work experience in today's conditions reveals three groups of factors (socio-economic, management-related, pedagogical). These factors require one to respond to social and economic transformations in society through the constant development of theoretical and empirical studies in the social field). Let us consider and analyze them separately.

Socio-economic factors. Certain social problems, including social disorders and different forms of addiction, are still topical in Ukrainian society today. In turn, they require professional involvement of social workers (see Table 1.1) (Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukrayiny, 2021).

Table 1.1. Individual indicators of health and social disorders among the Ukrainian population

Indicator	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
The number of HIV-infected and AIDS-positive patients (total number/per 100 000 people)	129260/ 284.9	139715/ 308.8	138107/ 323.0	126759/ 297.6	133117/ 313.8	141577/ 335.4
The number of patients with alcoholic addiction (total number / per 100 000 people)	39445/ 86.9	37780/ 83.4	30920/ 72.2	28921/ 67.8	29381/ 69.1	28314/ 66.9
The number of patients with drug addiction (total number/per 100 000 people)	5533/ 12.2	4750/ 10.5	3791/ 8.9	3666/ 8.6	3822/ 9.0	4095/ 9.7
The number of people with special needs (total number/ per 1000 people)	2495.2/ 53	2710.0/ 59	2831.7/ 63	2568.5/ 60	2614.1/ 61	2635.6/ 62
The number of children who are orphaned or otherwise deprived of parents	92865	90722	83716	73183	71178	70240
The number of offences	447147	563560	529139	565182	592604	523911

The number of the unemployed (% from the total number of economically active citizens)	7.5	7.2	9.3	9.1	9.3	10.1
The number of families with low income, applying for subsidy (in the course of the year)	424421	453762	564062	826131	993974	984246

As follows from the data in Table 1.1, some indicators demonstrate positive tendencies. At the same time, certain social problems remain urgent and require rapid solutions on the level of the state’s social policy, social institutions and social services agencies, qualified social support.

Traditionally, research on social deprivation is of the applied nature since it seeks to solve specific social problems, requiring particular attention from the state and society. Studying “the representatives of social problems” allows one to register the fact of their existence, describe living conditions and challenges they face daily and justify socially imitated models of behaviour. Furthermore, social research enables society to react to certain social phenomena and problems, distinguished by their destructive nature.

Today, social work practice encompasses significant experience (including foreign achievements) and updates. Research projects are conducted on the orders of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine. Findings are subsequently used to solve certain social problems. The examples of such projects are as follows: “Employment Policy Implementation under Ukraine’s Integration into the European Union”; “Complex Analysis and Projection of Trends in Employment Creation following Ukraine’s Socio-Economic Policy of Regional Development”; “New Approaches to Poverty Solution in Ukraine”; “Updating Social Standards in the Context of Decentralization and the Reform of Local Self-Government in Ukraine”; “Designing Algorithms of Shifting from In-Patient Care for Elderly People and People with Special Needs, Residing in Boarding Houses, to Assistance in Adapting to Family Accommodation”.

It follows that professional duties of social workers change under updates in the organization of social care, as well as its specifics and technologies. At the same time, various innovations and reforms in the social security system positively affect social research.

Nevertheless, it is still on the agenda to reform pension provision in Ukraine. The transition from a pay-as-you-go pension plan to a fully funded one radically changes the position of social workers regarding clients. Interestingly, the main task of social workers used to be correct pension calculation and payment control. Nowadays, however, emphasis is placed on sustainable life support and development. Besides, social workers strive to find such methods that would help involve citizens of all ages in life quality improvement. New approaches to pension provision urge social workers to study one's life resources, identify factors complicating one's self-realization and discover ways of motivating the population to take responsibility for the future.

The legislative activity also contributes to developing social research. Evidence suggests that judicial principles of social work, regulating social security in Ukraine, are constantly changing. Shifts in the legal framework create certain "boundary conditions", under which social institutions and social services agencies function. This leads to the development and implementation of new forms and methods of work. In their turn, social workers should be able to promptly and efficiently develop methods and technologies of social work to assure high quality of social research under the new conditions.

Thus, it is crucial to involve future social workers in research activity all the stages of social work practice so that they can ensure effective social protection of the population.

Management-related factors. According to Holovatyi et al. (2004), a peculiar feature of the Ukrainian model of social work is its rapid development. Over the past decades, social work has separated from other segments of the social sphere, as can be seen from legislative, financial and organizational aspects. This is manifested in the intensive growth of the social protection system that positively affects research activity of its managers (leaders, administrators). A detailed analysis of relevant studies (Holovatyi et al., 2004; Lukashevych & Tulenkov, 2007) shows that functional responsibilities of social services managers are closely related to research activity (both as the process and result). In particular, it involves such elements as identifying a problem, creating a model of a problematic situation, suggesting and evaluating alternatives.

Regarding the social sphere it is considered as a vital part of scientific and practical search, performed by social workers in the process of their research activity. It must be noted that social research is mostly conducted by innovative teams of social workers. They introduce new forms and methods of social works, optimize existing ones or combine both to achieve

positive results. In this regard, it is important to constantly boost social workers' motivation towards research and development.

The subjects of SEW and best practices are, first of all, innovative teams as the authors of a set of new ideas and corresponding methods and technologies, as well as social workers-innovators. They introduce new or improve elements of existing forms and methods, combine them, achieving positive results of social practice. In this connection it is important not only to train social workers in methods and techniques of research activity, but also to form a system-creative component - positive motivation for constant participation in SEW.

The authors of the article have conducted a survey of heads of social institutions and social services agencies from the Transcarpathian region to assess their research skills (26 respondents). The findings show that 88% of the respondents believe that both senior and middle managers require research skills. At the same time, 31% of the respondents assess their own research skills as sufficient for efficient management; 64% of them – obviously insufficient; 5% of them failed to answer.

However, all the respondents point out that it is essential to include research activity into social work training in higher education institutions, as well as involve practising specialists in relevant advanced training courses.

At the meso-level, the aim of research activity is twofold. First, it aims to scientifically justify the priority areas in a social policy of regions, cities and districts. Its specificity is reflected in social development programmes of a particular social institution. Second, it ensures purposeful and scientifically grounded innovative activity in certain social institutions.

Thus, all levels of social work are closely related to research. The micro-level (technologies) is the most crucial element of social practice. This level is a response to the fact that every technology of social work acts as a symbiosis of the universal (normative) and the unique. It always contains some uncertain and problematic elements which cannot be eliminated as before (Grinnell & Unrau, 2010; Marlou, 2010; Rubin & Babbie, 1997). When social workers lack research knowledge, skills or abilities, they begin to regulate their activity rather vigorously. It is unacceptable since it bureaucratizes social support and “equalizes” all clients, disregarding their social problems and resources. Neglecting research activity leads to violating one of the basic principles of social work, which is targeting.

Evidence suggests that social workers apply research knowledge, skills and abilities when: a) analyzing the client's situation and identifying some unsolved problems; b) planning activities with the client and determining the sequence of practical actions; c) evaluating both

appropriateness and efficiency of the chosen methods for solving a particular social problem; d) collecting information about the client's needs and social services agencies; e) search for effective resources to optimize the client's and society's independent functioning (self-aid and mutual assistance); f) developing and implementing innovations in social institutions and social services agencies, thus enhancing the efficiency and quality of social services; g) promoting new social programmes.

This information that social workers obtain from interacting with clients during social studies is of great value for management and planning, as well as for training. Empirical data are often generalized and analyzed in various publications (reference books, reports, scientific articles, manuals). This helps to consolidate knowledge about social work practice, social management and offers effective ways of solving social problems. Finally, research activity enriches the theory and methods of social work, reinforces its professional ideology and ethic code.

A rather wide scope of trends in research activity requires social workers to skillfully use various research methods (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, systematization, questionnaires, observations, interviews). Therefore, research skills must indeed be included in a set of social workers' professional skills.

The third group includes *pedagogical factors*. On the one hand, these factors are directly connected with research activity of social workers. On the other hand, they determine the necessity of social work training in higher education institutions. It follows that the research-based paradigm serves as the basis for developing today's higher education and optimizing the content of social work training (Nadvynychna, 2013).

Recently, the growing role of science in society has led to the fact that all spheres of human activity are dependent on intellectual and creative resources. In particular, a new type of a historical epoch, which implies other ways of life, thinking and culture, has been evolving since the second half of the 20th century.

Given that the scope of knowledge increases every 10-15 years, higher education institutions should prolong the duration of degree programmes so that future specialists can be armed with professionally relevant information in the context of the traditional educational paradigm and corresponding technologies (Chervinska, 2015).

At the same time, it is important to teach graduates to quickly adapt to professional conditions. Today, many professions exist for only 5-15 years and then disappear or transform greatly. It means that mono-professionalism is being replaced with multi-professionalism. The latter

implies a wide range of professional knowledge and skills, which may be easily integrated into a new field of activity. This approach is seen as one of the ways of ensuring socio-professional mobility of employees and enabling them to change the character of professional activity and themselves in accordance with changeable professional functions, working conditions and spheres of activity (Sushentseva & Sushentsev, 2016; Gerasymova et al., 2019).

Nowadays, many experts in philosophy, pedagogy and psychology claim that higher education institutions should prepare graduates for a wide range of careers. They should be able to work in uncertain conditions and easily shift from one task to another.

In Japan, multi-professionalism is viewed as the basis of life and functioning of any industry. They believe that those specialists who have mastered 3-4 bordering fields of activity and continue to master new ones every 2-3 years are very much in demand in the labour market. Therefore, higher education institutions should motivate students to acquire new knowledge and, most importantly, strive for continuing professional development.

Thus, social work training relies on the following aspects: research-related, applied, moral and spiritual. The essence of research activity is quite natural: one cannot develop professional qualities neglecting research activity; future specialists will be able to rapidly and adequately react to a changeable social situation only with the help of the necessary knowledge and skills acquired in the course of research activity (Healey, 2005).

Conclusions

Research activity serves as the basis for developing theoretical knowledge and optimizing forms and methods of social work. A detailed analysis of relevant studies shows we understand that the advent of social research in Ukraine dates back to the late 19th century – the early 20th century.

However, we want to draw some important conclusions for current sociology within the framework of the tasks set forth in this article, which can help the scientific-theoretical and practical progress of such research, especially when modeling social work in culturally and politically marginalized regions:

I. First such attempts much relied on practical experience and life observations. Later on, research practice began to employ methods of disciplines related to social work (sociology, psychology, pedagogy). Besides,

social research thrived from the fruitful development of theoretical-methodological approaches and concepts of social work (psychodynamic theory, symbolic interactionism, social learning theory, conflict and systems theory), which required social workers to use certain research tools. In the mid-20th century, numerous scientific strategies of social support and corresponding methods appeared. It became obvious that social work training should also include research activity. A summary of social work experience in today's conditions allows one to identify three groups of factors (social-economic, management-related, pedagogical). These factors urge one to respond to socio-economic transformations in society through theoretical and empirical research in the social sphere.

II. The current research work of postmodern social workers is almost indistinguishable from service work proper (social services). This indicates, in our view, a maximum syncretism of the branches. This is a consequence of postmodernist holism in the humanities and the borderland sciences. Another feature is the emergence of research within educational institutions on local (regional) social problems with clearly defined social groups (Grady, et al., 2018), as well as the spread of personal social and sociological reflections. In general, social practice, personal experience, and scholarly work tend to be the only project now.

The postmodern factor that moved the "attention vector" to the self and a real individual, even a typical citizen, introduced elements of self-consciousness and reflection to VAT, but these aspects have not been revealed to a sufficient extent in Ukraine yet.

III. In countries of transitional democracies, particularly in Ukraine, along with individualistic, subject-oriented postmodernist tendencies, the following factors remain powerful engines of research work:

Socio-economic factors. This group of factors are determined by the specifics of Ukraine's social, economic and political situation. They manifest themselves in social protection of the population (social work, healthcare, education, culture).

Management-related factors. Both social institutions and social services agencies should be able to identify changes in society and promptly respond to them. It is possible through adjusting to new conditions (updating forms and methods of activity) or applying innovations. One must admit that the specificity of these factors lies in the multi-functionalism and variety of forms, methods and technologies of social work due to its high-innovation potential. Therefore, social research should aim to influence all the necessary levels, namely, from theoretical surveys to the summarization of the pioneering experience of social institutions, social services agencies and

social workers. Eventually, it will strengthen social protection of the population in the country.

Pedagogical factors. Finally, people have realized the need to transform an educational paradigm and promote research training in the social sphere. Universities should strive to provide students with universal knowledge to teach them to cope with industrial and social challenges, develop learner autonomy and critical thinking. In this regard, it is essential to shift towards active learning so that future specialists can gain valuable experience, especially in the sphere of research.

Consequently, SEW of social workers in Ukraine in the current conditions is actualized by socio-economic, managerial and pedagogical factors. The first are related to the fact that the social order of society requires the creation of such an institution of social work, which would quickly and adequately respond to the aggravation of traditional and new social problems. Managerial factors are caused by the innovative activities of social institutions and services, which is caused by the active development of the social work system. Pedagogical factors imply the development of social education based on the research paradigm that sets new benchmarks for the goals, content, forms and methods of professional training of social workers.

Perspectives of the research. Each of the factors we mentioned has its own prospects for development in Ukraine and the countries of developing democracies. The main problem is the expedient direction of human, financial and energy resources, which are still lacking.

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