

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2023.68.08.23>

How to Cite:

Kuznetsova, O., Chubuk, R., Maiboroda, O., Khoroshev, O., & Maksimov, D.S. (2023). Psychological features of training future social workers. *Amazonia Investiga*, 12(68), 248-257. <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2023.68.08.23>

Psychological features of training future social workers

Психологічні особливості підготовки майбутніх соціальних працівників

Received: June 25, 2023

Accepted: August 25, 2023

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Abstract

Social work belongs to professions that have emerged and established themselves to meet urgent societal needs. The purpose of specialists in this field is not only to create necessary conditions for the social protection of people, groups, and communities but also to foster their ability to build their lives and mobilize internal resources to overcome life crises. The article aims to characterize the practical significance and types of social work while exploring the essence of psychological aspects in the professional activity of social workers. The main directions of the article are to investigate the interrelation between social work and psychology and to clarify the psychological features of education for future social workers. Several research methods were employed, including general scientific methods such as synthesis, analysis, deduction, and induction, which helped determine the research goal and conduct the analytical processing of scientific sources. It enabled the structuring of available domestic and foreign literature on psychological

Анотація

Соціальна робота належить до професій, які виникли та утвердилися для задоволення нагальних потреб суспільства. Метою фахівців у цій галузі є не лише створення необхідних умов для соціального захисту людей, груп і спільнот, а й сприяння їх здатності будувати своє життя та мобілізувати внутрішні ресурси для подолання життєвих криз. Метою статті є охарактеризувати практичне значення та види соціальної роботи при дослідженні сутності психологічних аспектів у професійній діяльності соціальних працівників. Основними напрямками статті є дослідження взаємозв'язку соціальної роботи та психології та з'ясування психологічних особливостей навчання майбутніх соціальних працівників. Методологія. Теоретичне підґрунтя статті опирається на наукові матеріали та вітчизняну та зарубіжну психологічну та соціально-педагогічну літературу. Було застосовано декілька методів дослідження, у тому числі загальнонаукові методи синтезу, аналізу, дедукції та індукції, що дозволило визначити мету дослідження та провести аналітичну обробку наукових джерел. Крім того, застосовувалися специфічні методи

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and social work matters and the historiographic and retrospective methods. The research findings reveal vital theoretical aspects of psychological preparation for future social workers during their educational process. The study of scientific-practical materials allowed identifying essential trends in training for social work professionals.

Keywords: social worker, psychological support of the population, social work, social assistance, personality formation of social workers, use of psychological methods in social work.

Introduction

Social work should be focused on assisting in solving social issues for people, groups, and communities, developing techniques for overcoming difficulties, and fostering self-help skills. The fundamental principles for social work are social justice and respect for human rights. In many developed countries, this field of activity is one of the most widespread professions.

Modern psychology seeks to assess its own capabilities and development prospects in social work, which requires practical application and intervention in a crisis or complex life situations. It searches for answers to questions about what psychology 'can' or 'should' do to successfully address the acute tasks of providing assistance to various population groups. It requires new approaches that need to be developed and constantly improved in applied psychology.

According to the opinions of many researchers, to this day, there remain open issues concerning the definition of the essence and understanding of the psychological aspects of social assistance. The same is true for their theoretical and methodological significance in building a model for the practical implementation of this type of activity.

The theoretical part of this study substantiates the concept and components of social work as a professional activity where the psychological abilities of a social worker are an integral part of the general professional competence.

The practical part of the research includes an assessment of disciplines related to acquiring

дослідження, в тому числі структурний метод. Це дало змогу структурувати наявну вітчизняну та зарубіжну літературу з питань психологічної та соціальної роботи та застосувати історіографічний та ретроспективний методи. Результати дослідження розкривають актуальні теоретичні аспекти психологічної підготовки майбутніх соціальних працівників у процесі навчання. Вивчення науково-практичних матеріалів дозволило виявити суттєві напрями підготовки фахівців із соціальної роботи, враховуючи потреби у набутті ними досвіду надання психологічної підтримки.

Ключові слова: соціальний працівник, психологічний супровід населення, соціальна робота, соціальна допомога, формування особистості соціальних працівників, використання психологічних методів у соціальній роботі.

psychological competence by future social workers and trends in strengthening the psychological preparation of specialists in this field.

Based on the research findings, conclusions have been drawn regarding the issues addressed. Specifically, it has been established that the state pursues a range of multifaceted activities to support and enhance responsibility for the quality of professional activities of such specialists. It includes developing a competitive system of educational institutions engaged in the upbringing, training, and qualification improvement of psychological-pedagogical and scientific-pedagogical specialists.

Literature review

Social work is a particular form of professional activity of authorized bodies that provide state and private assistance to persons to ensure the material, social and cultural level of their lives and provide individual service to a person, family, or group. Social action is based on the practical realization of humanitarian and democratic ideals and offers psychological support for recipients of social services (Balakhtar, 2019), (Zaveryko et al., 2022).

A distinguishing feature of social work in most countries is its close connection with social protection. For example, according to the definitions provided by most researchers, social work encompasses a range of assistance types:

- social and domestic;
- medical-social;

- socio-legal;
- socio-pedagogical.

These types of aid are always objective and directed at meeting specific needs (Xie et al., 2022), (Saar-Heima, 2023), (Sur, Ashcroft & Adamson, 2023).

The International Association of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work have adopted an international definition of social work, which, according to its authors, can be applied in any region or country. The definition formulates as follows: "The profession of social work promotes societal change, resolves problems in human relationships, and enhances the well-being of persons, families, and communities. It involves the pursuit of social justice and the well-being of people" (Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2023), (Pascoe, Waterhouse-Bradley & McGinn, 2023).

Social work occurs in various forms where numerous complex interactions exist between people and their environment. The task of social work is to enable people to maximize their potential, enrich their lives, and prevent the development of dysfunctions. Professional social work is aimed at problem-solving and effecting change (Ravalier et al., 2023), (Balakhtar, 2018a).

As social work belongs to the group of "person-to-person" professions, it requires specific personal qualities from those who choose this profession (kindness, politeness, tolerance, discipline, empowerment, etc.), as well as the ability to communicate with people. This specialty offers opportunities for self-realization to those who empathize and understand the problems of others and strive to help people lead a dignified life, regardless of physical, functional, or psychological crises. Social work distinguishes itself from other "person-to-person" professions (such as doctors, educators, psychologists, lawyers, etc.) due to its complexity and psychological demands (Balakhtar, 2018b), (Ding et al., 2023).

Social work practice involves collaborative efforts of social workers and social institutions aimed at researching the needs of various target groups and communities to promote the optimal social adaptation of people, families, and groups of the population through care, social and psychological counseling, representation, and advocacy for their interests, management, planning, and provision of necessary services, consulting, prevention, therapy, fostering their

independence, and problem-solving. For this purpose, social workers must possess appropriate methods and work skills based on various knowledge and theories (Lustick et al., 2020), (Fedorenko, Havrysh & Velychko, 2022).

Scientific psychology possesses an extensive, diverse, and unique set of facts that is not fully accessible in applied psychology. This material is also collected and interpreted in specialized fields of psychological science:

- geriatric psychology;
- educational psychology;
- industrial psychology, social psychology;
- zoopsychology, and others (Fedorenko et al., 2019).

Historically, psychological knowledge plays a significant role in the social sphere. Scientific-psychological conclusions are now utilized wherever people communicate, interact, and build relationships (Havrysh, Velychko & Fedorenko, 2021).

Undoubtedly, psycho-adaptive learning is the most challenging as it is responsible for shaping the following comprehensive systems:

- socio-psychological skills (cognitive, perceptual, motivational, etc.);
- socio-psychological traits (social activity, responsibility, etc.);
- practical abilities (communication, interaction, etc.) (Kropelnytska, Myhovysh & Kulesha-Lyubinets, 2019).

One of the most pressing issues in training social workers is the problem of selecting personnel and assessing the professionalism of specialists. In addressing this problem, it is crucial to consider the personal peculiarities of future social workers and adhere to a complex of ethical norms necessary for providing professional assistance in each specific situation. Since acquiring various knowledge and skills is an essential prerequisite for the practical work of a social worker in solving client problems, preparing social workers should be designed so that future specialists acquire general knowledge and skills at the university level. It can then be refined through continuous learning and practical work (Ahmed, Hamzah & Abdullah, 2020).

In their professional activity, social workers can perform various social roles: advocate for clients' interests, educator, mediator, organizer, healthcare worker, consultant-administrator, expert in economics, social policy, protection,

etc. Consultation plays a vital role in social work. Thus, the issue of assessing the level of professionalism of specialists in this field is one of the most relevant. On the way to addressing this issue, it is necessary to adhere to ethical rules of social workers' activity and build the training of future professionals following these norms to ensure their assimilation and mandatory application in professional practice. Equally important is to identify personal qualities that a social worker should possess to be effective in counseling and rehabilitation work, and to utilize acquired knowledge in professional consultation and develop these qualities in students as future social workers (Kropelnyska, Myhovykh & Kulesha-Lyubinet, 2019).

An increasing number of experts involved in the theory and practice of counseling and social work are concluding that the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the client and the social worker is more important than the philosophy, methods, or techniques the latter adheres to. Therefore, the fact that a social worker must possess not only specific knowledge and skills but also relevant qualities for this work becomes more significant. They should adhere to a set of ethical norms and rules based on universal values and personal work experience, contribute to the normal functioning of persons and groups in need of social assistance, and ensure and protect such people (Bierman & Sanders, 2021).

It is worth noting that there are currently no practical studies of educational programs that would determine the directions of future social workers' study of methods of social work with different categories of clients, as well as the degree and vectors of state programs and special measures aimed at improving the quality of psychological education of social workers.

Taking into account the above, as part of this study, an evaluation of educational programs was carried out to find out the vectors of psychological training of students-future specialists in social work, as well as an assessment of the acquisition by this category of students of skills in mastering methodological tools for working with certain categories of clients.

Methods and Materials

This study aims to determine the criteria that regulate the quality of psychological training of a social worker for professional activity, as well as the areas of psychological knowledge study by future social workers. The practical part of the study highlights the key aspects of state support and the improvement of the quality of psychological training of specialists in this field.

A practical study of current trends in the psychological training of future social workers was carried out using the evaluation method. Based on this method, the study of the psychological assistance specifics in social work was conducted with further generalizations and conclusions, descriptive and analytical methods. These methods contributed to the analysis of socio-economic reforms and their impact on forming the social sphere. The method of extrapolation allowed to spread the conclusions obtained as a result of the research.

The data analysis was carried out by processing the theoretical material, as well as by calculating the hours of the special course in the field of "psychological training" for social workers according to the content modules and types of classes of higher education institutions of Ukraine and the data processed by scientists.

Results

For the practical study of the key psychological aspects of training future social workers, it is worth analyzing the areas of teaching psychological knowledge to future social workers (Table 1).

Evaluating the thematic directions of higher education curricula and conducting professional training for specialists in the field enables the identification of two main learning vectors for such professionals. The first direction comprises a set of disciplines covering the fundamentals of general and social psychology, aimed at students acquiring new knowledge, skills, and necessary abilities. The second direction consists of a range of subjects providing future social workers with specialized psychological knowledge and an understanding of the psychological foundations of social work.

Table 1.

The system of disciplines for the acquisition of psychological competence by future social workers.

Education area	Academic disciplines aim
A set of disciplines covering the basics of general and social psychology	Mastering by students the prerequisites for acquiring new psychological knowledge and skills to form the necessary competences
A set of highly specialized disciplines of social and psychological direction	Providing the future social worker with psychologically specialized knowledge and ensuring the mastery of the psychological basics of social work

Source: compiled by the authors based on (Korneshhuk, Kolodijchuk, & Bodelan, 2018).

Mastering these subjects allows students to experience how the knowledge acquired in the first level can be practically applied to comprehend better the issues of professional interaction most commonly encountered by social workers' clients.

Thus, studying the psychological characteristics of different developmental stages and considering them in social work with respective

age groups contributes to integrating knowledge gained in the field of developmental psychology into the professional awareness of future specialists.

Particular attention should be paid to students' knowledge of various forms of psychopathogenesis and social work methods with different client categories (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Students learning of mental deontogenesis forms and methods of social work with different categories of clients.

Source: compiled by the authors based on (Zaveryko et al., 2022; Fedorenko et al., 2019).

Studying the psychological aspects of social work with different population groups is determined by the necessity for future social workers to familiarize themselves with the psychological specifics of various population groups requiring social assistance and the methods specific to providing such help. These groups primarily include the following:

- Chronically ill people;
- Disabled persons and their families;

- Elderly and isolated citizens;
- Victims of abuse and violence;
- Unemployed people;
- Participants and victims of armed conflicts;
- People affected by technogenic disasters;
- People experiencing post-traumatic stress disorders, and others.

Psychological characteristics of problematic families and population groups identified as "at-risk" (people with addictive and deviant behavior, people who will return from detention centers, etc.) are considered separately, as are the specifics of social work with them. Moreover, understanding the basics of ethnopsychology, the psychological specifics of social work with different ethnicities, and the prevention of ethnopsychological conflicts is also necessary.

Currently, strengthening the psychological skills spectrum for professionals obtaining higher education as social workers and enhancing the qualifications of current specialists in this field is an essential prerequisite for the modernization of the education system. The state provides the following measures to support and increase responsibility for the quality of professional activity of such specialists (Figure 2):



Figure 2. Current trends in state support for the quality of psychological education of social workers. Source: compiled by the authors based on (Zaveryko et al., 2022).

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- development and improvement of the regulatory framework for the professional activity of psychological, social, and scientific-social workers;
- forecasting and meeting the needs of society and the labor market for these specialists;
- development of a competitive system of educational institutions that provide education, training, and professional development of psychological, pedagogical, and scientific and pedagogical specialists;
- development and implementation of state standards of psychological and pedagogical education of different levels of education and qualification, as well as state standards of postgraduate education;
- mastery of modern information technologies by psychological and pedagogical specialists;
- regular updating and harmonization of the content of education, advanced training, and preparation of psychological and pedagogical workers;
- introduction of a system of targeted state support for the psychological training of social workers and their professional development;

- improvement of the motivation system for professional development and professional advancement of social workers, opportunities to learn foreign languages, etc.

The state creates conditions for raising specialists' prestige and social status in this field and forms a system of professional selection of young people to higher education institutions.

However, the problem of professional training for highly qualified modern specialists has long gone beyond the scope of their educational institution or even the higher psychological-pedagogical education system. It is necessary not only to qualitatively update the content of future social workers' professional training but also to shape their personal qualities. It is vital for re-education, socialization, and adaptation, which such professionals will carry out in the future.

Studying the processes of personality formation in social workers, most foreign and domestic scholars believe that regardless of where and in what direction social work is carried out, the social worker must be able to clearly identify the essence of clients' socio-psychological problems, develop an appropriate action plan, ensure the practical implementation of the plan, and

correctly evaluate the results of their work. This means that the significant importance of preparing social workers as professional representatives of the "human-to-human" group lies in forming the practical component of their professional competence.

Indeed, the specificity of preparing social work specialists requires the formation of strong practical skills and an understanding among students that the activity of a social worker does not consist of working with documentation, normative instructions, and regulations but of directing this profession toward working with people. Therefore, the professional training of social workers is based not only on executive-

instrumental education, which includes the formation of knowledge, skills, and abilities in educational institutions, but also on psychological readiness - the assimilation of the future role of a social worker in the labor system.

The following assessment of the dynamics of the number of special course hours in the "Psychological Training" area by content modules and types of classes is provided to assess the intensity of strengthening social workers' psychological and social training. They were introduced as part of the state-supported in-service training to improve the psychological competence of social workers in Ukraine (Table 2).

Table 2.

The hours of a special course in "Psychological Training" for social workers by content modules and types of classes.

Content modules	Number of hours							
	Lecture classes		Practical classes		Independent work		Amount	
	2018	2021	2018	2021	2018	2021	2018	2021
1. Theoretical and methodological basis of psychological social work	14	18	10	11	36	42	60	71
2. Theoretical and practical basis of psychological social work	26	30	20	25	74	81	120	136
Total	40	48	30	36	110	123	180	207

Source: compiled by the authors based on (Korneshhuk, Kolodijchuk, & Bodelan, 2018).

As Table 2 shows, there is an increase in the attention of state institutions to this type of social workers' competencies (Korneshhuk, Kolodijchuk & Bodelan, 2018).

Discussion

The life of a modern person is constantly accompanied by various stressful situations, most of which, fortunately, a person can cope with more or less effectively on their own. However, there is a whole spectrum of stressful events (physical, sexual, psychological violence, technological and ecological disasters, involvement in military conflicts, loss of loved ones, family and school stress, etc.) that lead to post-traumatic stress conditions and reactions of different origins, with consequences that a person, considering certain personal characteristics, cannot cope with independently. Therefore, the development, creation, and implementation of social workers' knowledge in the psychophysiology of stress, its causes and consequences, personal and group rehabilitation methods, self-help, and correction of post-traumatic stress disorders are highly relevant and vital. The preventive care of "at-risk" groups for

post-traumatic stress disorders of various origins is equally important (Bierman & Sanders, 2021).

Modern science has developed an understanding of social work as a professional activity in which the psychological abilities of the social worker are an integral part of general professional competence. These abilities are determined by the desire to help persons or groups ensure their existence and social interaction, support people's self-esteem, and develop personal and social responsibility. Psychological competence, in turn, requires the ability to study a person's psychological and personal characteristics, understand the conditions of their life and communication, and take them into account in everyday practical actions. It also involves using relevant knowledge and abilities for diagnostics, psychological correction, and comprehensive assistance to various disadvantaged populations.

A social worker's psychological competence is only possible with a firm reflexive position regarding personal abilities, enabling the determination of the limits of knowledge and skills in specific situations. Therefore, an essential and integral part of the social worker's

psychological competence is an adequate self-diagnosis, namely:

- self-awareness as a person,
- awareness of one's abilities, and possibilities of interaction and
- assistance in different social work situations (Forman, 2019; Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2018).

The intensive use of psychological methods in social work is because social work clients are people in complex life situations. The development of methods and implementation of psychological support is traditionally within the scope of practical psychology. A social worker must be able to provide an individual psychological approach to each client and understand the psychological peculiarities of different social categories (Blewitt et al., 2021; Forrester et al., 2020).

Psychological assistance is understood as a specific form of service to solve personal, family, or professional psychological difficulties. This type of assistance can be both informal and professional. Social workers work with families and children who have found themselves in difficult life situations, people with disabilities, and older people. The study of cognitive, emotional, volitional, and communicative spheres helps them in diagnostic, correctional, and preventive work with these population groups, providing psychological assistance (Lynch, Newlands & Forrester, 2019; Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2018).

The psychological and pedagogical training of future specialists in the context of democratization and humanization of education, with a focus on the implementation of "subject-subject" relationships in the psycho-educational process, should contribute to the following:

- personal development of future professionals,
- satisfaction of their professional educational interests and needs,
- formation of social and professional mobility,
- the ability for professional and personal communication,
- conflict prevention,
- a creative resolution of professional tasks,
- to promote the development of collective solutions to professional tasks. (Huang et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Therefore, the professional training of future social workers in higher education institutions aims to form their professional knowledge, skills, and personal and professional qualities necessary for the successful performance of various types of social work when interacting with different consumers. The result of such training, in a broad sense, can be the professional competence and professional preparedness of a social work specialist. The issue of optimizing the training of social work specialists to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their psychological activities is a very urgent, complex, and multifaceted task. It requires an integrated scientific approach involving specialists from many fields of science and education.

The study of the psychological and pedagogical cycle disciplines by future social workers should ensure the formation of a conscious attitude to the psychological aspect of education and understanding it as a necessary component of professional training. That means a willingness to cooperate in the choice of their additional content and implementation forms.

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