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Dynamics of assertive behavior in the social work students

Динамика асертивного поведения студентов- будущих социальных работников

Dinámica del comportamiento asertivo en los estudiantes – futuros trabajadores sociales

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Written by:

Anton Stoykov⁷<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7347-5408>

Abstract

The article deals with the dynamics of assertive behavior in the Social Work students as assertiveness is one of the most important personal skills needed for the successful interaction between them and their Clients who face a difficult life situation. The characteristics of assertiveness have been theoretically determined paying special attention to the specifics of its manifestations in the interaction between the Social Worker and the Client. On the basis of the conducted empirical study involving Social Work students, analyzed is the dynamics of their assertive behavior based on some of its main components and on their integrity as a personal quality. Considering the research results, justified is the need of including in the educational process specially elaborated programmes with a main focus on the development of assertive behavior.

Key words: dynamics, assertive behavior, Social Work, development

Аннотация

В настоящей статье рассматривается динамика асертивного поведения студентов специальности „Социальная работа“ как одно из важнейших свойств личности для повышения эффективности взаимодействия между ними в качестве будущих социальных работников и клиентами, оказавшимися в трудной жизненной ситуации. В теоретическом плане выявлена характеристика асертивности, причем особое внимание уделяется особенностям проявлений при взаимодействии „социального работника – клиента“. На основании проведенного эмпирического исследования при участии студентов той же специальности проанализирована динамика их асертивного поведения не только в составляющих его компонентах, но и в целостном личностном образовании. На примере полученных результатов обосновывается необходимость включения в процесс образования специально разработанных программ, которые преимущественно направлены на формирование асертивного поведения.

Ключевые слова: динамика ,асертивного поведения, Социальная работа, формирование.

Resumen

El artículo analiza el problema de la dinámica del comportamiento asertivo en los estudiantes de la especialidad "Asuntos sociales", como una de las propiedades más importantes de su personalidad, con miras al aumento de la efectividad del proceso de interacción entre ellos, como futuros trabajadores sociales y los clientes que se encuentran en una situación difícil de su vida. En plan teórico se dan las características de la asertividad, prestando especial atención a las peculiaridades de las manifestaciones y la interacción entre el trabajador social y el cliente. Sobre la base de un estudio empírico realizado con estudiantes de la misma especialidad, se analiza la dinámica de su comportamiento asertivo por sus componentes principales

⁷ Associate Professor, PhD Trakia University Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

y como una formación general de la personalidad. En base a los resultados obtenidos se motiva la necesidad de inclusión en el proceso formativo de programas especialmente desarrollados, destinados prioritariamente a la formación de comportamiento asertivo.

Palabras clave: dinámica ,comportamiento asertivo, Asuntos sociales, formación.

Introduction

The present stage of societal development is associated with ongoing changes in all the aspects of social life, including also social work. The result is constantly increasing requirements towards the professionalism of the Social Worker. The Social Worker is also expected to possess skills for the creation of an environment which supports mutual understanding and collaboration, and the establishment of relations of mutual trust.

The creation of such an environment to a major extent is determined by the Social Worker's personal qualities, by the specifics of his/her speech behavior, including not only exchange of information between the Social Worker and the Client, but a friendly attitude, fair personal judgement, awareness of the Social Worker's own personality but also the Client's personality, self-confidence, self-dependence, independence, initiative, self-control and emotional stability.

In this sense, among the most important personal qualities and skills of the Social Workers is assertive behavior as it is a vital component of their professional competence, ensuring mutual understanding and the establishment of humane relationships with the persons facing a difficult life or social situation.

In social work, the effectiveness of the process of interaction between the Social Worker and the Client can be associated with the Social Worker observing the main rules of assertive behavior. Among these are manifestation of self-respect and respect for the other person, carrying out a successful dialogue, the undertaking and bearing of responsibility, manifestation of confidence and positive attitude, the desire to reach a mutual agreement.

In Bulgaria, according to information from various studies, low self-esteem and low self-confidence are predominant in a large number of the Social Workers. This can possibly be due to the fact that the professional activity related to social work is one of the most demanding ones in purely psychological aspect.

At the same time, however, Social Workers contribute for the social well-being of their clients which excludes to a large extent the possibility that they themselves might be feeling low self-confidence. In this connection, the studies carried out by A. Butt and Z. Zahid prove that assertive habits reduce occupational burnout making it possible to develop a feeling of job satisfaction. Developing the level of the assertive habits helps mutual understanding and trust, reducing severity of conflicts and stress. (Butt, Zahid, 2015)

Analysis of research and publications

G. Medvedeva points out that it is a duty of the Social Workers to be successful in their personal and social life, to be able to establish long-term and friendly relations with the people from their surroundings, to enjoy their respect, trust and support. A major part of these requirements towards the Social Worker's personality are directly associated with the development of assertiveness as a personal skill. (Medvedeva, 2011)

E. Holostova sees the Social Workers' assertiveness as an element of their social competence which according to the author incorporates also social maturity, professional position, communication skills and self-efficacy. (Holostova,2007)

In psychology, assertiveness is seen as the individual's main quality associated with other personal qualities such as purposefulness, self-confidence, self-dependence, independence, initiative, self-control, emotional stability, perseverance, determination, rigour to oneself and the other people, ability to bring the beginning to an end. These qualities, acc. to I. Lebedeva make-up the structure of assertiveness. The process of developing assertiveness as a personal skill is mediated by the fact to what extent the individual's behavior is determined by his/her own motives and aptitude and to what extent by those imposed on him/her from external sources. (Lebedeva, 2010)

According to a study carried out by R. Tanck and P. Robbins, a person who has achieved a high score on the assertiveness scale, is more communicative, analyzes his/her own problems, talks about them, acts actively. Opposed to the people with low assertiveness levels, the assertive individual is less prone to irritation, isolation, less prone to passively bearing the discomfort. The same authors point out that assertiveness is in a statistically significant positive relationship with such a mechanism of the psychological adaptation to stress as is problem solving. (Tanck and Robbins, 2008)

For V. Kaponni, the structure of assertive behavior is made up of the following elements:

1. Personal responsibility for one’s own behavior. By nature, assertiveness is a philosophy of personal responsibility. This means that we are responsible for our own behavior and we do not have any right to blame other people for our reactions towards their behavior.

2. Manifestation of self-respect and respect for the other people.
3. Successful communication. In this case, important are the following three qualities: honesty, openness and straightforwardness in the conversation, however without harming the other person’s emotions.
4. Manifestation of confidence and positive attitude.
5. Ability to listen carefully and understand.
6. Negotiations and reaching a mutual agreement.
7. Trying to find simplified outcomes from complicated situations. (Kaponni, 1994)

V. Dorofeev, A. Shmeleva, and Iu. Chastuhina (Dorofeev, Shmeleva, & Chastuhina, 2004) point out the following five stages of assertive behavior:

Table 1. Stages of Assertive Behavior

Stage	Example
1. Behavior description	“In this case if you act like.....”
2. Expressing your feelings	“I am feeling.....”
3. Empathy	“I understand why you.....”
4. Suggesting an alternative solution	“I would advise you on looking at another option.....”
5. Information about the consequences	“If you do that/If you don’t do that, I”

According to I. Swimmer and V. Ramanajach, assertive behavior may be seen as a “happy medium” between aggression and passivity, incorporating certain features of both. (Swimmer, Ramanaiah, 1985)

S. Stein and G. Book study the structure of assertiveness as an aggregate of three main components: ability to express different feelings, ability to openly express one’s own beliefs and thoughts, ability to protect one’s personal rights. (Steven, Book, 2011).

E. Hohlova points out the following personality and behavioral characteristics of the assertive personality:

- positive openness, emotional attachment, behavior which is opposing inertia, energy as an expression of the inner forces and needed for creativity,

- activity, persistence as an expression of one's own position;
- self-confidence as an indicator of knowing one’s own worth and the worth of other people, social courage and initiative in the social contacts as a manifestation of activeness with regards to development and knowledge
- temporary orientation of the individual related to cognitive activity and evoked by the value of knowledge. (Hohlova, 2008)

The assertiveness manifested by the Social Worker is directly associated with the self-control at the time of communication in the process of the interpersonal interaction between the Social Worker and the Client.

Here, considered are the manifestations of respect and care by the Social Worker, as well as

restraint from insults, interference and attempts to interrupt, which according to Louise Harms support effective communication and mutual understanding. The well- developed self-control skills in terms of communication allow the Social Worker to carry out a dialogue and organize and manage the overall communication process between him/her and the Client. (Harms, 2007) Summarizing the concepts of different authors, I. Peneva and K. Yordzev accept that “assertiveness can be defined as a complex, polycomponent personality construct, the main elements of which are self-confidence, self-respect and respect for the others, the individual’s ability to actively stand for one’s own interests, to openly express one’s own goals, intentions and feelings without harming the interests of the other people around him/her. (Peneva, Yordzev, 2010, line 269).

Assertiveness as an important career skill plays a special role in the complex of general knowledge and job-related competencies of the Social Work students. It suggests that they able to:

- critically evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses;
- successfully interact with their colleagues and clients;
- to strive for their own personal development by further improving their qualification and professional excellence;
- find solutions in non-standard situations and be responsible for them;
- to accept the criticism addressed to them with grace and appreciation;

With regard to their communication skills, and in particular development of assertive speech habits, they should be able to develop:

1. Congruence (correspondence between the meaning of their speech and their non-verbal behavior);
2. Emotionality of speech, manifested by openly expressing their feelings and emotions;
3. Ability to spontaneously express their needs and desires;
4. Using of the "I" form in their own statements referring to themselves;
5. Ability to constructively oppose, manifested by openly expressing their own opinion without taking into consideration the opinion, reactions and appraisals of the people from their surroundings.

D. Abdumadjidova considers formation of assertive behavior in students as a creative, multi-aspect process going through the following stages:

1. The individual should look at themselves and realize the extent to which his/her own behavior is determined by the individual’s preferences and stimuli and to what extent by his/her past experience-negative past experience or insufficient positive experience.
2. Developing an assertive behavior pattern. The main goals for the development of assertive behavior are achieved on the basis of particular social situations reflected in role-playing games or real life conditions.
3. Gaining a particular scope of psychological knowledge and social competencies. (Abdumadjidova, 2016)

An important personal quality of the Social Worker associated with a well- developed assertive behavior and successful career, is the responsibility which he/she is able to undertake and bear, understood as a readiness to accept the consequences of his/her decisions and actions.

All the characteristics of assertive behavior and of assertiveness as a category enlisted above prove the necessity of developing assertive behavior in the Social Work students considering the specifics of their future job.

The social interaction between the Social Worker and the Client is a process encompassing on one hand exchange of material and spiritual values and, and on the other hand - mobilization of the Client’s inner strengths. The nature and success of this interaction depends on a larger extent not only on the Social Worker’s professionalism, but also on his/her moral and personal skills among which is assertiveness.

Methodology

In order to determine the dynamics of the level of assertiveness in the Social Work students, an experimental study was carried out encompassing an ascertaining and control stage. It involved 36 students both full-time and part - time.

Observed was the dynamics for a period of 2 years. For the purposes of the study an adapted personality scale was used for measuring the assertiveness in high – school age students

developed by I Peneva, G. Kidikov and K. Yordzev.

The scale is based on 38 items, 27 of which are related to the studied psychological characteristics and 11 of them are questions aiming to divert the respondents' attention from the subject of study in order to avoid tendentious manipulation of the results.

For the response data the 3-level ordinal scale is used: Level 1 –rarely; Level 2 – sometimes; Level 3 –usually. The test reliability has been verified by analysis of the inner consistency and the test-retest methods. To determine the statistical significance of the results obtained, the SPSS 23 statistical package has been used.

The mean scale score is 57.83 and the standard deviation is 6.236, i.e. scores below 51.59 indicate low assertiveness levels and scores above 64.07 indicate high assertiveness levels. The total test score is estimated by summing up the scores under the three factors and by adding the number of points for questions 19, 28, and 29.

The mean score for factor I - "Personal and consumer rights protection" is 19.08 and the standard deviation is 3.328, i.e. scores below 15.75 indicate a high level of capability to protect one's own interests and scores above 22.41 indicate a low capability level.

The mean score for factor II - "Confidence and initiative" is 21.17, and the standard deviation is 2.938, i.e. scores below 18.23 indicate low levels of confidence and scores above 24.10 indicate high levels of confidence.

The mean value for factor III - "Expressing feelings and appraisals" is 11.64, and the standard deviation is 2.052, i.e. scores below 9.59 indicate low levels of openness and scores above 13.69 indicate high levels of openness in terms of sharing one's own feelings and opinions (Peneva, Kidikov, & Yordzev, 2014).

Results and discusión

The results reflecting the dynamics of assertive behavior in the Social Work students are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Dynamics of Assertive Behavior in the Social Work students

Factor	Stage	Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Factor 1 Personal and consumer rights protection	Ascertaining Stage	17.4722	.061
	Control Stage	19.2222	
Factor 2 Confidence and initiative	Ascertaining stage	22.33	.052
	Control stage	23.69	
Factor 3 Expressing feelings and appraisals	Ascertaining stage	12.22	.466
	Control stage	12.55	
Total score	Ascertaining stage	58.16	.025
	Control stage	61.02	

Protection of the personal rights analyzed in the context of the occupational rights in the process of interaction with the Client by the Social Worker should take place without violating the following moral and ethical principles:

- respecting the Client's right to take his/her own decisions;
- respecting the Client's trust;

- respecting the professional ethics and honesty;
- respecting the Client's personality.

By protecting his/her own rights, the Social Worker should not harm the Client's rights or the overall process of interaction between them.

The results obtained for factor 1 "Personal and consumer rights protection" indicate that the

difference between the two mean values measured during the two stages of the experimental study is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). Their numerical expression reveals average levels with regards to development of this capability. The tendency observed in the dynamics of development is negative, although as we have already mentioned, its statistical insignificance.

We believe that similar results are determined by all aspects of the interaction between the students and the surrounding society, and not only by the impact which the educational process at university has on them. One of the manifestations of assertiveness in the process of professional communication is namely the capability to stand for one's own personal rights.

This suggests that in the event of a conflict situation, the Social Work students should demonstrate firmness and not give way to manipulations on side of their opponent. Included here is also the adequate and appropriate reaction capability in terms criticism facilitating reaching of a mutual agreement in the process of interaction.

The professional field in which the Social Workers make their career involves complex decision-making processes, very often in situations characterized by insufficient information and a high level of uncertainty. This requires them to independently find the most suitable strategies and make decisions corresponding to the values of social work and resulting in effectively solving their Client's social problems. Without well -developed confidence and initiative, these processes would be significantly more difficult and hence, their overall professional activity.

The results for factor 2 "Confidence and initiative" show average levels for the two stages of the study. For I. Skotnikova confidence is one of the most important basic personal qualities which starts to form in the early childhood, and later it is becoming more and more important for revealing the individual's skills and determining his/her place in life. (Skotnikova, 2002).

Seen is a positive dynamics for the period between the ascertaining and the control stage, although in this case, too, the difference between the two mean values is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). As one of the factors with an impact on this dynamics we can point out the large number of hours for practical training during which the students do their internship in social

institutions which vary in terms of their specifics and activity.

The gained knowledge in theoretical and practical aspect for the time of internship with no doubt has a positive effect also on their initiative and confidence. In this regard, work is carried out also on the elaboration and approbation of specialized psychological trainings within the framework of the educational process with a focus on accelerated formation of these two personal qualities of such importance. In the process of education, significant in this case is also the educational interaction between the teacher and the student. The confident behavior of the students –the future Social Workers should possess the following important characteristics:

- persistence in achieving of goals, without manifestations of aggression;
- manifestation of adequate reactions in the conditions of a constantly changing environment;
- purposefulness.

Considering the characteristics of the assertive behavior, it is important that the future Social Workers possess well developed skills for expressing their feelings and appraisals.

This will enable them in their future career to provide to their Clients not only socio-organizational support within the scope of their authority, but also be capable of solving their psychological problems as much as this is possible.

The appraisal expressed by the Social Worker and related to the Client's personality, actions and behavior in the process of rendering support, and considering assertiveness, should be as much unbiased as possible, not harming the Client's dignity and always convey a positive message.

For factor 3 "Expressing feelings and appraisals" statistically significant dynamics between the two stages of the experimental study is not observed. The obtained results confirm an average level of development for this factor. The capability of appropriately expressing feelings and appraisals in the process of interaction between the Social Worker and the Client facilitates in the first place the manifestations of empathy which promotes collaboration and ensures emotional attachment. It is at the basis of the constructive social communication and development of altruistic behavior.

With regard to the total score, there is a statistically insignificant positive dynamics with regard to the mean value. The obtained results during the ascertaining and the control stage of the experimental study confirm average levels of assertiveness in the responding students. This allows us to conclude that in the university educational process, specially elaborated programmes should be included, mostly in the form of training technology, supporting high levels of assertiveness development in students.

Among the main objectives of such programmes, pointed out should be also the establishment of a new type of relations in the university educational environment, built on the grounds of mutual agreement, readiness for collaboration and bearing of responsibility. These should be based on the following principles:

- Principle of initiative;
- Principle of encouragement and supporting personal activeness;
- Principle of tolerance

The main objectives which should be pursued with regard to the purposeful formation of assertive behavior in the students can be put down as follows:

- Developing skills for open expression of one's own thoughts and feelings;
- Better knowledge about one's own personal rights and their realization;
- Developing skills for using constructive criticism and its appropriate perception

Conclusion

The theoretical analysis and the results from the experimental study allow us to draw the following important conclusions:

1. In terms of the social work interaction specifics, assertiveness is an important skill of the Social Work student's personality, seen as a complex formation incorporating confidence and initiative, standing for one's own rights, independence from external impacts and appraisals, open expression of feelings and emotions, self-control over one's own behavior, undertaking and bearing of responsibility.
2. The traditional educational process at the university does not fully contribute to the Social Work students' development as assertive personalities. This is confirmed by the results

obtained during the experimental study, showing statistically insignificant changes in the dynamics of the development of assertiveness in them given the specifics of the traditional education.

3. This requires the improvement of this process with specially elaborated programs aimed primarily at the development of assertiveness in the future Social Workers. We support the opinion of M. Dudina saying that as far as in the structure of the assertiveness and its contents incorporated are the value-essence, cognitive, emotional, motivation-volitional, operational activity, communication, morale and reflexive components, the responsibility for their timely development is vested in education. (Dudina, 2016)
4. The effectiveness with regard to developing assertiveness in the Social Work students on a large degree depends on the nature of the psychological and educational conditions existent at university and related to the peculiarities, specifics and contents of the educational process.
5. The conducted theoretical and experimental study confirms that the problem related to development of assertiveness in students and in particular in the Social Work students, is one of the most important issues of the social work education and it requires further profound development and study.

In this meaning, needed is elaboration and introducing of scientifically justified programmes and specially designed teaching technology with a focus on accelerated formation of assertive behavior.

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