CONSTRUCTING SUPPORT FOR THE FAMILY IN THE CASE OF CHILD’S DISABILITY: APPROACH OF SKANDINAVIAN ACTIVITY THEORY

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Abstract
Social support for the family in child’s disability case is analyzed in the article. The main theoretical framework drowned towards not investigated before in Lithuania approach of Scandinavian activity theory to support. The attitude is accentuated on unique family’s situation when it faces disability phenomenon. Child’s disability requires a holistic approach of multi-professional network: therefore, Scandinavian activity theory is very suitable theoretical framework for actualization of role of social worker as mediator in multi-professional team in order to construct effective social support for child and family as a one system.
KEY WORDS: Scandinavian activity theory, social work, disability, mediation.

Anotacija
Straipsnyje analizuojamas socialinis palaikymas šeimoms, auginančioms vaikus su negalia. Pagrindinis teorijos konceptas yra anksčiau Lietuvoje netyrinėtas Skandinavijos aktyvumo teorijos požiūris į pagalbos teikimą. Akcentuojama unikali šeimos situacija, susidariusi su negalios išgyvenimu. Vaiko negalio prieinamasis visumino požiūrio tarpprofesiniame tinkle, todėl Skandinavijos aktyvumo teorija ypač tinka socialinio darbuotojo, kaip tarpininko, vaidmeniui tarpprofesinėje komandoje atskleisti, užtikrinant veiksmingą socialinį palaikymą vaikui ir šeimai, kaip vieningai sistemai.
PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Skandinavijos aktyvumo teorija, socialinis darbas, negalia, tarpininkavimas.

Introduction

Activity theory initially was created by Russian psychologists Vygotski, Alexei Leont’ev and Sergej Rubinstein. Later the activity theory was developed into Scandinavian activity theory by Nardi, Kuutti, and Yrjö Engeström. Both versions of theory analyses the complexity of real life activity. Theories are analyzing individual subject and the social reality through the mediating activity. Earlier and later activity theories hold a concept of activity system compounding of object (or objective), subject, mediating artifacts, rules, community and division of labor. The activity of individual is created because of tensions and contradictions.

Activity theories (earlier and later) are coherent with qualitative research methods and helpful in constructing the understanding of analyzed phenomena. Theories show that individual is seeking a particular goal using tools.

Later activity theory, known as Scandinavian activity theory is commonly used in two ways, one, referring to early Russian tradition or applying the original ideas
for further development. It means that Scandinavian activity theory is open for expanding and interpretation of researcher.

Ramsay (2003, p. 335) states that in the 21st century the definition of social work is changing and the domain of practical social work becomes mediation. Gilgun and Abrams (2002, p. 43) note that social workers proving social support may not only be mediating between external resources, but also acting in larger systems.

Despite theoretical-ideological foreign ideas, social work practice as permeation with different levels of mediation either externally or in larger systems is not so widely spread in some countries, like in Lithuania. This understanding is directly related to the historical approach and practice. In the official declaration on social work of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, there is absent his role in external resources, described as networks of other professionals. Varažinskienė (2009, p. 129) analyzing the basis of social work legislation notes that social work still lacks historical practice understanding that it has remained so for a long time. She (ibid, 129) also writes that legislation regulating social work practice is still developing in Lithuania.

Petraitienė et al. (2006, p. 25) states that social work as mediating could be the core of social work when constructing social support for a family in a disability situation. Baranauskienė and Gudinavičius (2007) note that despite changes in paradigms towards the disabled, mediation in social work is only being started to be spoken of.

Soar et al. (2005, p. 35) and Flynn, (2005, p. 408) describing the mediator states that the mediator’s role is first of all facilitating open dialogue between the disputing parties, but at the same time remaining independent and neutral throughout the whole process. The mediator promotes constructive communications between the parties (Barsky, 1999, p. 482). Provision of social support for families via mediation is seen as the social worker’s dealing between the families and the external resources that affect them (Kiselica, 2004, p. 843).

The mediator promotes reconciliation, settlement, compromise, or understanding among two or more parties. The social worker and specialists of external resource are the participants of the mediation process in order to provide social support (Petraitienė et al., 2006, p. 25). The mediator’s role assumes that the mediation process creates choices in acting for the stress-buffering effect in a particular situation (Davidson, Demaray, p. 2007).

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Therefore, the aim of this article – is to present Scandinavian Activity Theory as example of mediation in social work in child’s disability case.

The object – is social worker’s role as mediator in child’s disability case.

Method of analysis – literature overview.

1. Family stress and mediation

R. Vaičekauskaitė (2007ab) describing various family researches made in Lithuania, notes that stress is one of the most statistically important factors in the context of disability. Gedvilienė and Baužienė (2009) describing the family’s situation raising a child with disability note that it is an everyday stress experience.

Data from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (www.socmin.lt) show that the number of children with disabilities is growing each year in Lithuania. Therefore, increasing the need for support is imperative. Research by Guscia, Harrises, Kirby, Nettelbeck, and Taplin, (2006) showed that people, who suffer from multiple disabilities, need the most intensive support. Kreiviniënė (2007, 2011) and Vaičekauskaitė (2008) state that support is essential as people with disabilities are more vulnerable because of social changes in society. These authors (Kreiviniënė, Vaičekauskaitė, 2010) write that the situation in families where there is a disabled person is complicated; therefore, support must be orientated towards rebuilding stability and harmony. Families caring for a disabled person are involved in meeting many specialists, but the social worker, in principle, could be the closest in providing support within this multi-professional system (Kreiviniënė, 2011).

2. Scandinavian activity theory application in social work with families

Social work has many faces in the social support process, though Scandinavian activity theory is one of the examples of possible mediation. Activity theory being a psychological and multidisciplinary theory has a set of perspectives interlinking family level with social support at the specialists’ level. Figure 1 portrays the provision of social support when the social worker is in the role of mediator and using rules and tools to incorporate other professionals for achieving welcomed outcomes for family.

Barab et al. (2002, p. 78) writes:

When discussing activity, activity theorists are not simply concerned with ‘doing’ as a disembodied action but are referring to ‘doing in order to transform something’, with the focus on the contextualized activity of the system as a whole (Engeström, 1987, 1993; Kuutti, 1996).
Social work as mediating is seen as acting in order to provide better social support and its achievements for the family. Fjeld et al. (2002, p. 155) notes that the subject (social worker) interacts with the other specialists in external resource in order to help the object (family in disability situation). Families in disability situation in its particular periods of life battle with stressful burdens and need to receive social support from external resources for adjusting adaptive behaviour.

Engeström’s (cited in Paavola et al., 2004, p. 560) sociological approach that human beings do not live in a vacuum but are embedded in their sociocultural context, and their behaviour cannot be understood independently of that context (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki, 1999) gives a full picture of the social support context. When a family is dealing with stress, the stress-buffering model may be applied via mediation and in sharing the specialized issues among the professionals. However, this external resource deals with family stress not only depending on their inner peculiarities, but also depending on the existing historical-cultural background. Sheppard (2006) notes that families in a stress situation are more likely to take a passive position than actively fight for the needed support.

![Figure 1. The work activity of a social worker](image)

(Engeström, 2007; Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström, 2008, p. 31)
CONSTRUCTING SUPPORT FOR THE FAMILY IN CHILD’S DISABILITY CASE: ... 

Figure 1 shows that social workers activate social interaction among the professionals for supporting the family in the way it needs. The social support context is seen in this figure as rules and tools. Fjeld et al. (2002, p. 155) writes that via the process of social support family members can rebuild social interactions and internalize this capability into mental activity.

Engeström and Miettinen (1999, cited in Nilsson, 2003, p. 60) write that social work’s importance lies in the conceptualization of provision of social support via the mediation function. The social worker as active agent deals with other professionals and they together locate the social support on the demand of the stressful situation. Huotari (2008, p. 83) notes that activity theory represents a specified view of provided social support in any period of family life.

When we speak about social support constructed towards the family, the social worker as a specialist closest to family applies negotiation for analyzing demands, needs, expectations, and resources. The same way other professional may negotiate with concrete family and meet their needs. When two-parties are unable to solve the situation, the social worker or other professionals may form a working group, where the social worker acts as mediator in order to provide social support for the family. Then the social worker helps to hear both sides: professionals and parents. Mediation should be perceived as an active process where different tools, rules and artifacts are engaged for achieving positive outcomes for the family.

3. Mediation compounds

Prakapas (2007, p. 14) analyzing the legislative discourse of social work in Lithuania writes that in the brief historical approach many positive changes have already been implemented. He (ibid, p. 14) mentions the main problem – the practical implementation of measuring quality.

Figure 1 portrays family-orientated help including Foot’s (2001, p. 10) described aspects:

1. Hierarchical structure of activity: Activities (the top-most category) are composed of goal-directed actions – providing social support. These actions are performed consciously. Actions, in turn, consist of non-conscious operations.

2. Object-orientatedness: Objective and socially or culturally defined properties. Our way of doing work is grounded in a praxis which is shared by our co-workers and determined by tradition. The way an artifact is used and the division of labour influence the design. Hence, artifacts pass on the specific praxis they are designed for.
3. **Mediation**: Human activity is mediated by tools, language, etc. The artifacts as such are not the object of our activities, but appear already as socio-cultural entities.

4. **Continuous Development**: Both the tools used and the activity itself are constantly reshaped. Tools reflect accumulated social knowledge; hence they transport social history back into the activity and to the user.

5. **Distinction between internal and external activities**: In contrast to traditional, Activity theory emphasizes that internal mental processes cannot be properly understood when separated from external activities that is the interaction with the outside world”.

A basic notion of Scandinavian activity theory is that the family participating in an activity does so because it wants to achieve a certain goal. Its interest is directed towards the object – social worker of an activity which the family tries to use and modify to achieve and anticipated outcome (satisfaction of provided social support). The family’s interaction with this social worker is mediated by tools, creating the basic triangle of Subject, Object, and Mediating Artifact.

Such an activity process is working as social support via mediation. Ramsay (2003, p. 334) writes that this model helps to act social worker family-centered. Fuller (1975, cited in Zapf, 2005) conceptualizes that the existence of the self and otherness entities depend on their relationship to one another. Social work claims to be relationship centered, with its domain focus on social support for family.

**Community** comprises various individuals and/or sub-groups who share the same general object (Huotari, 2008, p. 84). The social worker has to take care of the family’s satisfaction with services provided by various professionals, mediate helping to communicate. It is necessary to appraise that satisfaction with services primarily pursued as intermediate outcomes enhance specific emotional states (self-efficacy, self-esteem of single family member), social interaction and marital/family interaction (Rosen et al., 2003, p. 214–215).

The **division of labour** refers to both the community and the specification (Huotari, 2008, p. 84; Haug, 2005, p. 133). When professionals in external resource divide labour, they use decentralized decision making, team-based policy, and participative management. Evans and Davis’s (2005, p. 768–769) position is that flexible work provides greater opportunities for engaging in role making.

**Rules** refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system (Engeström, 1987, 2007; Huotari, 2003). The human activity system is self-directing. It develops by resolving internal contradictions and external contradictions between the system and the environment. Contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts;
they are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems. On the one hand contradictions in the work process appears in the work as disturbances, breaks and dilemmas and, on the other hand, as innovations, attempts to resolve the contradictions of human activity individually or together in a new way (Huotari, 2008, p. 84–85).

Discussion

It is under the discussion whether roles of social worker in mediation are clear and the boundaries are seen when dealing with disability case. Flynn (2005, p. 412) writes that for social work professional roles in the mediation process are clear, the same as interaction balance – there is always an ethical responsibility to construct social support for the family. Various interactions among professionals balancing techniques should be used by the mediator to contribute to the positive representations of a family receiving social support.

Each working specialist acting in external resources and dealing with other professionals has to know the rules at the core of their profession, no matter if it is medical, education or social work. Hare (2004, p. 413), Carrilio (2007, p. 528), Chan and Ng (2004, p. 313), and Taylor (1999, p. 311) write that social work since its inception showing its concern about people who are coping with the problems and vicissitudes of living. Bidgood et al. (2003, p. 405) has the idea that meetings of different professionals can be paraphrased that instead of presenting the understanding of social support as fragmentized action orientated towards the family, each professional knowing his professional boundaries must interact via the mediation process for the family’s sake and move beyond the expert professional paradigm, instead of it using the idea: think outside the box.

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