

Economization Discourse in the Process of Creating Professional Ideas of Family Assistants

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Preface

Jay Lemke (1995) made a distinction between the concepts of *text* and *discourse*. *Text* is a specific and unique form of realization of discourse, which is defined at a more abstract level as a social activity conferring meaning through language (Lemke 1995, p. 7). *Discourse* comes to the fore through text.

This paper provides an overview of the discourse that is reflected in the analyzed written texts - training materials for social workers called in Poland "family assistants". These are materials used by various "experts" in the course of the training focused on improving the professional qualifications of the family assistants. It is therefore a discourse functioning in the *field of action*¹ (Cf. Wodak 2008b), namely the education of case workers.

The Polish system of social welfare includes family assistants who serve as field case workers. They are employed by state organizational units, i.e. Communal and Municipal Social Welfare Centre. The legal basis which regulates the profession of family assistant is the "Act on Supporting Family and the Foster Care System" of 9 June 2011. By this act, the assistants "support families having difficulty in carrying out its functions in the area of care and upbringing" (Article 1,2,3 of the Act on Supporting Family and the Foster Care System).

The materials I based my text on are derived from the different types of training conducted at the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Lodz, for the family assistants who work there. Lodz is a city of about 706,000 inhabitants (data from 2014) (Szukalski, 2016, p. 2) located in central Poland. Here, family assistants benefit mainly from the training organized by the Regional Centre for Social Policy (RCPS) – an organizational unit of the regional government of Lodz. RCPS activities are focused on the implementation and development of the regional social policy, which also translates into staff training addressed to social assistants and other social workers. RCPS, funded by the EU, is organizing vocational training in cooperation with the Human Capital Operational Program. In practice, RCPS issues a public bid and, for the purpose of conducting training, contracts out a selected entity. The reasons and criteria behind the selection are very general. Usually it is the price that is a deciding factor, followed by the experience of the trainers selected by the chosen entity. Since the criteria are very loose and open to interpretation, it is the functioning belief that the price, and not the substance, is the main reason to choose one training-offering entity over another. In Polish realities, Social Welfare Centres often do not engage in regular cooperation with the qualified, experienced specialists in the field of social work trainers. The result is a kind of randomness in the selection of trainers. The effect of such a situation is that trainings are often conducted by

¹ The *field of action of the discourse* may be understood as the area of the discourse which makes its *frame* and shapes it (Wodak 2011, p. 31).

people of varied skills and different professional experience, and for the mixed group of people (not only social workers) employed by the city or regional Social Welfare Centres.

Introduction

The theoretical inspiration for the conducted study were the views of Michel Foucault on the perception of discourse as a tool of *power-knowledge* (French: *pouvoir-savoir*), which shapes the knowledge of the subject - determines the possible forms and fields of cognition (Foucault 1995, p. 27).

This article is addressed to all those interested in the issues of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) referring to the theories of Michel Foucault, used for considerations on the analysis of discourses functioning in the area of education of social workers.

In 2007, social workers, social work teachers and social work researchers from Austria and Great Britain jointly protested against the negative effects that the neoliberal social policies have on social work (Block 2012, p. 163). The protest was described in the "Vienna Declaration on Economization and Professionalism in Social Work" in which we read:

“The pressure of cost-effectiveness and competitiveness seems to imply that increases in the efficiency of social work are indispensable. In any case, social work has to prove its utility in economic terms which, given the primacy of the economic, leads to the subordination of professional standards to business goals and the loss of professional self-determination of social work (...) The complexity of social work, therefore, cannot be grasped sufficiently via an unambiguous relation between means and ends” (Bakic, Diebäcker, Hammer 2007, p. 1, 2).

Neoliberal policies affect the management of the institutions which carry out social work (Webb 2006). This influence is reflected in the introduction of the techniques of the "new public management" to the public sector institutions where social workers are employed. These techniques are a practical application of neoliberal concepts associated with the flagship principle of the market as the organization of social life (Penna, O'Brien 2009). Along with the new management came bureaucratic standardization, corporate language, and budget management to which the logic of managing the institutions is subordinated (Ibid). A number of authors define this phenomenon as economization of social work, while pointing to its far-reaching potential consequences for the social workers themselves and for their activities. They have certain rationality of thought, language, system of values and logic of action imposed on them, all of which are characteristic for strictly market-related operations (see: Albert 2006, p. 27; Bakic, Diebäcker, Hammer 2007, p. 2; Werling 2011, p. 1).

In this article, I focus on the analysis of the discourse associated with the phenomenon of economization, which, according to Thomas Höhne, is characterized by the flow of semantics and rhetoric from the economic areas to the non-economic ones (Höhne 2012, p. 797). This discourse I refer to as the economization discourse.

The paper presents the following theses:

- The economization discourse as a training tool for family assistants.

- The heterogenous structure of the discourse consist of: the quasi- psychological discourse (called by Nicolas Rose *psy sciences*²), and the economic and practical discourses.
- The ideology of economization poses a potential threat to process of creating professional ideas of family assistants.

1 Methodological issues

The adopted ontological-epistemological orientation is based on the views of Michel Foucault based on the understanding of discourse as a transmitter of knowledge which makes an interpretative conquest and is inseparably linked to specific types of anonymous and distributed power relations, and these, in turn, are always intertwined with this or another form of knowledge (Foucault 2009, p. 29). The discourse is therefore a potential tool of influence on social practices (Barker 2000).

The *corpus*³ in the form of training scripts was analyzed during the participation in over a two-year interdisciplinary seminar of “Self-Educating & Research Nature for Social Pedagogues and Sociologists of Social Communication” at the University of Łódź, where media and institutional discourses were analyzed (Kamińska 2013).

Under the project, concepts were developed which made "broad categories" (Czyżewski 2013, p. 64) to guide the analysis of discourse. To highlight the *discursive components*⁴ I used the term *set*, which means:

“a heterogeneous constellation of discursive components co-existing in one program (text) and coming from different sources: various traditions of scientific and intellectual nature, different discourse areas (science, institutional life, daily life” (Czyżewski 2013, p. 64).

For the analysis of the manner in which the ingredients of discourse are combined I used the concept of *assembly*, which means:

“methods for linking the set components (e.g. simplification of the discourse referred to, exemplification of the general thesis, combining fragments of scientific and therapeutic discourses, etc.)” (Czyżewski 2013, pp. 64-65).

The body of the analyzed data comprised materials from the training courses in which I participated as an employee of a Municipal Welfare Centre - a family assistant. These were as follows: “Work of Family Assistants,” “Procedures and Processes of Working with a Family for its Reintegration,” “Family Mediation,” “Crisis in the Family: Recognizing and Diagnosing Problems and Adjusting the Level of the Family Directedness and Appropriate Forms of Assistance Depending on the Diagnosis.”

² Nicholas Rose includes in "psy- sciences" psychology, psychiatry and other disciplines with the prefix "psy" constituting the regimes of knowledge, through which individuals recognize themselves as specific entities (Rose1998, p. 42).

³ The *corpus* is a research material selected as representing a specific variant of the language in use (Cf. Bielecka-Prus, Horolets 2013, p. 168).

⁴ The content from various fields and areas of expertise, different in terms of vocabulary, style of expression and rhetorical strategies on persuasion and argumentation (Cf. Czyżewski 2013, pp. 64-65).

The analyses of the training materials were extended with the situational context in the form of the reaction of assistants to the economization discourse. This information comes from my *retrospective reflection*⁵ from the time when, as a family assistant, I took part in the above mentioned trainings.

The trainings were conducted within the project “Support and Development of Professional Skills of the Welfare and Social Integration Staff” of the Human Capital Operational Program financed by the European Social Fund, through which the European Union supports the socioeconomic development of all member states.

2 Construction of the economization discourse

The analysis of the economization discourse passed on to the family assistants was centered on the question: what discursive set can be found in the training materials? The isolated set contains three components of discourse coupled together that will be discussed below.

1. The quasi-psychological discourse – consists of knowledge from scientific fields that Nicolas Rose refers to as „psy- sciences” (e.g. psychology or psychiatry) (Rose 1998, p. 42). The discourse is quasi-scientific, because it is delivered in a vulgarized form by using *rhetorical strategies* (see: Wodak 2008, p. 186) such as: removal of references to the sources; removal of information about the authors; quoting knowledge in a brief and simplified form, sometimes taken out of context. The *style*⁶ of the statements is schematic in nature and resembles the walkthroughs of “human service”. It is illustrated by the following excerpt:

[an excerpt of a training session]: “The desired male characteristics preventing the development of personality of perpetrators of violence against women and children. Perseverance: in carrying out his social roles he does not “stray off course.” Firmness: as partner and father he consistently achieves his goals in life. Reliability: as partner and father he is present whenever needed. Never refuses to help. The family can always count on him and have confidence in him. Integrity: keeps his promises and fulfills his tasks even in the face of difficulty. Aware of himself: aware of the impact on his family, knowingly involved in the fate of the family, able to take risks. Eager learner in life: treats failures as life lessons.”

2. Economic discourse – provides content from such scientific fields as entrepreneurship, marketing and management. This discursive component introduces economic lexis such as⁷: performance, flexibility, success, profit, efficiency, time management, human resource management, cross-financing, etc. This type of discourse is constructed according to the logic of economic rationality, characteristic for a manager and a strategist, making decisions in accordance with the table of gains and losses determined by economic calculations. An example present in the scripts and illustrating this trend may be the following quotation showing the arguments concerning effective time management.

⁵ It is about reflection undertaken *ex post*.

⁶ *Style* is the choice of language variants on the level of expression (van Dijk 1998, p. 11 -12).

⁷ It is about the correctness of the choice of words (Mautner 2008).

[an excerpt of a training session]: “You should consider what takes 20 percent of the time, which allows you to get 80 percent of results and eliminate what is superfluous and what does not contribute to that 80 percent of the profits.”

Practical discourse - it is not knowledge of scientific nature, but of practical one. This type of discourse includes all precisely formulated, schematic instructions on how to organize the process of help. Formulated as such is similar in its rhetoric to the rules or instructions of fire safety, occupational health and safety, etc. It informs in a detailed way how to conduct the aid procedure. I call this style “the drill language”. Below, there is an example of this discursive component:

[an excerpt of a training session]: “The objectives of the Action Plan must be arranged in a logical order, i.e. in the first place they should cover the following problems:

- housing,
 - material - obtaining a designated benefit (an assistant is separated from the allowance allocation process)
 - health care - making contact with specialist clinics,
 - legal – an assistant helps in obtaining the necessary documents, writing official letters, obtaining health insurance
 - psychological of family members, i.e.: emotional, family, occurring in peer groups.
- Subsequently, they should concern: social activity, mitigating conflicts with neighbors and family members, further education, including selection of the appropriate school or course, motivating for upgrading one's professional skills.”

3 Reactions of the training’s participants to the economization discourse

Since I participated in the training sessions from which the analyzed materials were extracted, I could observe the reactions of the participants, namely family assistants that revealed their attitude to the provided information. I noticed that the economic discourse and its logic of economic rationality did not evoke any special irritation among the participants. The assistants did not rebel against the arguments fitting in the rhetoric of efficiency and productivity, which concerned the effective activity in the field of social work. On the other hand, they opposed to the practical discourse containing hyper-detailed guidance on how to carry out social work, which was perceived as narrowing of the “autonomous” space of acting.

Based on the reactions of the trainings participants it can be assumed that the quasi-psychological and economic content may provide for them a potential symbolic capital in the form of discursive resources suitable for use in communication situations where the goal is to build arguments and justifications for actions taken within the framework of social work with the family. In this way, the economization discourse can strengthen its position in the field of education of family assistants. There is a risk that the logic of economic rationality will be internalized by the assistants and will become a part of their way of thinking and building reflections on the essence of social work.

4 Economization discourse in the process of creating professional ideas of family assistants

The process of creating *professional ideas*⁸ is understood as:

„(...) set of phenomena of creating and transforming ideas occurring in subjects that get engaged in acting; such phenomena relate to the *individual organization of the activity* (*Fr. organization singulière d'activité*) and concern the subjects themselves, namely the actors and their relations with the environment” (Barbier 2006, p. 160).

The above quote is an exemplification of the views of Jean-Marie Barbier on the meaning of acting, which, according to this author, begins as early as in the phase of professional ideas regarding the activities taken up (Barbier 2006).

The ability to create professional ideas is related to the competences of creating imaginative as well as discursive constructs (Ibid, p.74). It is about how the acting individual expresses his/her competences through what he/she says in specific situations at work, which indirectly also reveals the specifics of the ideas of this subject about the work reality (Cf. Ibid, p.74,78).

In my opinion, the economization discourse effectively spreads in the space of a Welfare Centre and “clogs” the area of activity designed for the education of family assistants. This leads to a situation where imaginary and discursive competences - which are the necessary cognitive and ethical facilities allowing for the analysis of the complexity of the situation of activity (eg. traps, dilemmas, obstacles, alternatives) – are not developed. Instead, the presence of economization discourse leads to the formation of a potential threat in the area of family assistants work process on professional ideas. This means that such discourse can exert influence on family assistant’s professional perception of details and the essence of their work related activities based on the thought paradigm contained in the ideology of economization, i.e. homo oeconomicus.

The economization discourse can also be used as a discursive resource in the situation where the subject uses the language characteristic for such discourse. Economic rationality which describes welfare assistance in the economization discourse seems to fit naturally into the institutional reality of a Social Welfare Centre⁹. Participants of this reality, sometimes against their own representations of the nature of social work, are obliged to use the discourse that can be referred to as the economization discourse. In this case, the knowledge acquired during the training constitutes symbolic capital, enriching the vocabulary of family assistants and allows them to articulate with greater precision their own actions in the spirit of homo oeconomicus.

⁸ Jean Marie Barbier writes about “ideas of activities” (Barbier 2006 , p. 160).

⁹ A social welfare center is a part of an institutionalized, bureaucratic world in which the valid principle is that of documentary effectiveness (Granosik 2012, p.188). Each family assistant is obliged to report in writing that the work ended with “success” because the individual tasks, and thus the targets, have been achieved. At the same time, the set goals and tasks are only the measurable ones and concern specific activities, such as: assistance in filing an application for social housing; assistance in arranging a learning place for a child or referring a family for consultation therapy. These are the tasks that are included in the “performance” of a family assistant - in quarterly reports he/she is required to enumerate in how many families he/she managed to achieve “success”, which in this case means the completion of all tasks scheduled for implementation in a given family.

Conclusions

The analysis contained in the above text discussing the economization discourse are designed to reflect on criticism related to the presence of such discourse in the area of education of family assistants as referred to a space in which their professional ideas about the nature of activities undertaken in the domain of social work can be shaped.

This article presents the viewpoint that “stuffing” the area of vocational training designed for family assistants with the economization discourse eliminates their chance to have reflective education that otherwise supposed to stimulate the process of creating professional ideas that contribute to capture the complexity of the activities in the field of social work. In my opinion the nature of social work cannot be reduced to the principle of maximizing the efficiency in the name of minimizing the resources.

To enhance the quality of the educational discourse used for the training of family assistants, systemic changes are required. As long as the Social Welfare Centres in Poland won't focus on the establishing of permanent cooperation with professionals who know the realities of social work and are the true experts in the field, the quality of professional training will most likely remain and be maintained at the current level. In my opinion, we should strive to ensure that family assistant's trainings are conducted by people who know the realities of the social work, and are aware of dangers posed by the use of economizing discourse in the training of social workers who conduct their professional every day activities through the personal every day interaction with the clients they work with. In this sense, ensuring the quality of the training involves the selection of the training staff who understand the dehumanizing and reductionist nature of the economizing discourse that leads to the field of social work expressed by the ideology of homo economicus.

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