

METHODOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE GERONTOLOGICAL CARE PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK: SOCIOLOGICAL AND DIDACTIC ASPECTS

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Abstract. The article reveals methodological approaches to the scientific study of the content of gerontological assistance to clients of social services as a direction of professional social work and a segment of university social education. A conceptual justification is given for the synthesis of sociological and didactic aspects of understanding gerontological social work in modern society. A theoretical and methodological analysis of socio-cultural factors of gerontological assistance to clients of social services and controversial issues of training future social workers in universities in technologies of gerontological assistance to the population is carried out.

Keywords: *Social work, gerontological care practice, social services clients, social education, university, students.*

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1. Introduction

Currently, in the social and humanitarian sciences, there is a growing interest in the methodological aspects of understanding older people as an object of research and the analysis of the essence of social work with elderly clients of social services, as well as in the theoretical and methodological problems of social work with the elderly and old people (Elnikova & Beketov, 2023).

This interest actualizes the need in the study of the problems of modern social work to distinguish the methodology of the practice of gerontological assistance to clients of social services as a state and result of professional social work organized in a certain way in modern society and the methodology of studying the problems of gerontological social work in modern society.

One of the most common meanings of the term “methodology” is: a special description of a set of techniques and methods used in any type of activity or direction of scientific research. In this case, the methodology acts as a scientific and theoretical explanation of the techniques and methods used in professional activities that have socio-gerontological characteristics of their content and as a scientific and philosophical definition of the techniques and methods used in the study of the content of gerontological care as a phenomenon of modern practical social work (conceptual approaches,

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theoretical models, scientific principles, philosophical judgments; comparative method, etc.).

The methodological substantiation of the practice of gerontological assistance in professional social work involves the analysis of both sociological aspects that reveal the influence of social and socio-cultural factors on the content and priorities of gerontological social work and didactic aspects that are directly related to the professional training of social workers at universities who are capable of providing gerontological assistance to clients of social services using innovative and the most effective social-therapeutic technologies.

Modern researchers of social education problems draw attention to the fact that understanding the process of education at the university should include knowledge about the “academic culture” and the context in which social work students are trained, which implies a tolerant perception of various “disciplinary cultures” when creating programs of professional pedagogical training for higher education teachers (Milutinović *et al.*, 2024).

Thus, a synthesis of sociological and didactic aspects related to the practice of gerontological assistance to clients in social work and its scientific research arises. Such integration of sociological and scientific-pedagogical knowledge about the problems of gerontological assistance to clients of social services presupposes an appropriate methodological justification.

In this case, the term “methodology” is used as a way to determine the relationship and dependence of the system of knowledge about gerontological social work and the system of professional activity of a social worker, which has gerontological characteristics of its content. It should be clarified that the system of knowledge in this case is the “system” (structure, types, kinds and content) of scientific and philosophical knowledge about gerontological assistance to the population.

From the social work theory point of view, gerontological assistance to clients of social services is a branch of practical social work and is at the junction of structural professional social work, andragogy and practical psychology. Modern scientific and theoretical options for substantiating the practice of gerontological assistance to clients of social services are based on an integrative analysis of the phenomenon of human aging, where the process of gerontogenesis is studied from the standpoint of an integrated approach.

This understanding of gerontological social work is based on scientific ideas about specific methods of social adaptation of an elderly person, the result of which can be influenced by various socio-anthropological, medical, social, socio-cultural and psychological factors.

2. Main part

2.1. Sociocultural factors of gerontological care for social services clients

A comparative analysis of scientific definitions of gerontological social work becomes the basis for considering a more general problem of differentiating the types of social security of the population in a modern state. Such differentiation should take into account the real trends of the current social policy in six main areas (old-age pensions, cash benefits for sick people, unemployment insurance, social assistance to the elderly and the aged, social education, preventive medicine) and pay attention to social assistance

and social protection programs for older age groups as components of improving the welfare state.

The result of this differentiation are four “clusters” of gerontological assistance in professional social work: institutional, neoliberal, populist and “residual”, which differ in the theory of social work, first of all, in content and target orientation.

The institutional “cluster” of gerontological care practices for social service clients performs high in social security, healthcare and social assistance, while the populist “cluster” performs moderately in social assistance and healthcare and moderate-to-high in social security. The neoliberal “cluster” performs moderately in social assistance and healthcare and it performs low in social security and the “residual cluster” performs low in all components (Yörük *et al.*, 2022).

In modern social work theory, it is customary to define psychosocial types of elderly people, which, according to researchers, manifest themselves in the strategy of successful adaptation (or readaptation) of a person in old age. Based on the content of psychosocial personality characteristics of social service clients, five types (models) of elderly people are classified: “mature type” (an elderly person free from conflicts, possessing personal independence); “rocking chair” (a dependent, passive elderly person relying solely on the help of others); “armored type” (an overly ambitious older person); “aggressive type” (an older person who blames others, who is not inclined to cooperate); “hating type” (a self-blaming, older person who is disappointed in life (Firsov *et al.*, 2020).

The implementation of these models in practical social work actualizes the interest in the problem of developing the professional competence of social workers, the structure of which is formed by cognitive, emotional, behavioral and value-semantic components. In addition, the professional competence of a specialist in gerontological social work consists of its communicative, perceptual and interactive varieties and presupposes, first of all, the presence of socio-cultural and psychological knowledge in the field of interaction between a social worker and a client, as well as the behavior of all participants in the social adaptation process (Lemish, 2023).

The need for such knowledge turns the study to issues of training and in general, education at universities of future social workers. The transition from sociological to didactic aspects that are related to the practice of gerontological assistance to clients in social work, subject to the condition of integration of these aspects, is possible with a theoretical and methodological substantiation of the problems of social education. In particular, it is possible to critically analyze the relevance of the concept of “a liberal education” proposed in the late 1950s by Charles William Hendel (1890-1982). According to his colleagues, Hendel succeeded in combining philosophy with social and human sciences in the practice of teaching at the university. In his teaching activities, he improved at Yale University (USA) “the mentoring system of uniting small groups of students with teachers, which was created at the university in 1905” (www.nytimes.com).

As a social thinker, Hendel may be of interest to modern researchers of the problems of education of social workers and in general, professionals in the social sphere with his methodology of “a liberal or universal education”. The reason for this interest is that historical, social, socio-cultural and intellectual attitudes are still relevant in the study of any pedagogical concept that is currently gaining popularity and attracting the attention of theorists and practitioners of social education.

Hendel’s methodology of teaching and learning is manifested in a combination of two concepts: 1. “The Vision of the Good Life in Society” (Hocking *et al.*, 1960) and 2. “The Great Importance of Education and Its Functions” (Hocking *et al.*, 1960). Hendel

draws students' attention to understanding society as the basis for understanding “a liberal education”. For him, “the true community is not something already in existence somewhere but in the vision which men have of the existence that is most truly worth having. It is an ideal, that is, some view of what is right or of what ought to be” (Hocking *et al.*, 1960).

From the point of view of the problems of training future social workers in the practice of gerontological assistance to clients of social services, the methodological emphasis is on the conclusion of Hendel that “each man’s place in life is thus according to merit and besides, the good of the community requires that every individual shall measure up to the job”. If the community accepts such a model of “a liberal education” it “might have a good effect in making them care more for the commonwealth and for one another” (Hocking *et al.*, 1960).

2.2. Methodological issues of the future social workers training in technologies of gerontological care to the population

Empirical studies show that the views and approaches of university teachers to teaching vary significantly depending on the nature and content of academic disciplines. There are obvious differences between university teachers of academic disciplines (technical, social, medical and natural sciences) in terms of how they conceptualize and technologize teaching to students. It is believed that teachers of social sciences and humanities at the university are more student-oriented and make extensive use of various teaching tools and technologies (Milutinović *et al.*, 2024).

This circumstance must be taken into account when training future professionals in the social sphere (psychologists, social advocates, social rehabilitation specialists, social educators, social workers) in practical issues of organizing and technologizing gerontological care for the population at the university. But the quality of such training largely depends on the changes that occur or should occur when university students study social sciences and humanities in general. Let us dwell in more detail on two aspects of such didactic changes in the system of higher professional education.

The first aspect expresses the need to correct the formation of “social scientific thinking” in students when studying specific issues of the influence of social and socio-cultural factors on the practice of gerontological care for the population. This is due, first of all, to the fact that in the context of reforming modern society, competence in many social sciences is becoming a need for future professionals in the social sphere.

Their professionalization involves achieving, during the learning process, such a level of political, economic, historical, sociological and cultural understanding of the processes and phenomena of modern society that gives them the opportunity to critically evaluate the results of applied research and conceptual approaches that form the basis for management decisions made at the municipal and regional level.

Therefore, one of the tasks of teaching social sciences and humanities is “combating social scientific illiteracy”, overcoming students’ conceptual, analytical and cognitive distortion of social realities, which is the result of various types of naive, simplified thinking applicable to understanding, for example, issues of state social policy or to making personal decisions (Mintz, 2022).

The task of teaching students can be for the teacher to inform them about the types of errors in reasoning, logic, scientific knowledge, which are currently quite widespread. But most often, such errors in thinking manifest themselves subconsciously and uncontrollably or even worse, can be used by someone to manipulate students' behavior.

The study of social and humanitarian academic disciplines at the university should be seen as an opportunity to familiarize students with the errors of thinking that arise due to the lack of systemic social and humanitarian scientific knowledge and the unformed ability to purposefully apply in teaching the basic concepts, methods and analytical techniques of research in the social sciences and humanities.

“Social scientific thinking”, as a rule, does not imply the reflection of individual empirical facts at the level of acts of faith in the event that students, during their studies, are generally capable of adequately following basic scientific approaches; analyzing specific data; conducting pilot socio-anthropological, economic, cultural, psychological and sociological research; as well as undergoing testing and attempting to situationally reproduce the provisions of concepts taken from social philosophy, political science, sociology and other related fields of knowledge.

Students are potentially able to understand the cause-and-effect relationship of the social processes and phenomena being studied, the correlation and the research sample. This does not mean that the social sciences and humanities are simpler and easier to study than the natural or physical and mathematical sciences. Rather, it explains that the methods, techniques and technologies for interpreting the knowledge of these sciences are more universal and widely available in the training of future social workers.

At the same time, in university education there is still a tendency to fragment knowledge and skills in the field of social sciences and humanities by academic disciplines instead of a holistic consideration of basic issues. More universal and multifaceted academic disciplines in content are aimed at developing in students the skills and abilities to research, interpret, analyze and apply the results of scientific research at the stage of practical professional training of social workers.

For example, universal academic disciplines in content introduce students to the basics of: a) the application of social science achievements in state gerontological policy and / or the everyday life of older people; b) the use of scientific social data, concepts and theories in the development of social programs and projects, technologies and methods of clinical, educational and social-therapeutic interventions in the life situation of an elderly person as a recipient of various types of social services.

It should be recognized that the idea of implementing a broader, universal, synthetic approach to the study of social sciences and humanities in teaching still seems superficial, artificial and simple to many university teachers. This is explained by the fact that such teachers, as narrowly focused professionals, mostly feel comfortable and confident only within the framework of specific academic disciplines. They fear that they will not be able to adequately assess the breadth and depth of the content of related scientific fields of knowledge in the process of training future professionals in the social sphere. In addition, a synthetic approach to education at the university may have a side effect: motivating many students to choose only one of the academic disciplines in the social sciences or humanities for more in-depth study. The doubts that arise in this case are caused by the fact that not a single academic discipline can fully reveal the most complex social problems of modern society, such as social justice, social inequality, globalization, the environment or information technology and digitalization. It is also obvious that each individual academic discipline brings its own methodology, categorical apparatus, object and subject of research to the content of student training.

Despite doubts and many controversial issues, the idea of a universal, synthetic study of social and humanitarian sciences by future social workers seems promising, since it focuses didactic material on current problems of practice and technologies of

gerontological assistance to clients of social services through the prism of the content of social theory and the problems of relatively recent research in social and political philosophy, as well as economics, sociology, psychology and cultural studies.

The advantage of such a technological approach to studying social sciences and humanities at the university is that it is initially supra- and interdisciplinary in design. Teachers become active participants in the learning process and not just narrowly focused professionals in a separate subject area. The skills that are most significant in any social practice - critical assessment, analytical research, interpretation and theorizing - become central in the process of professional training of future social workers to provide gerontological assistance to clients of social services.

The approach under consideration, as applied to issues of practical gerontological assistance to clients of social services, can be based on the study of one or several defining problems and contradictions of the social sphere of modern society (primarily gender, ethnic, racial, religious and sociocultural) through the use of combined methods and techniques of social and humanitarian knowledge and research of new scientific programs and projects that are currently in the center of attention of social anthropology, economics, social history, psychology and sociology.

The synthetic approach to teaching students technologies of gerontological care to the population also introduces them to the methodology and methods of applied social research, since only in this case they will be able to correctly understand the problems associated with the possibilities, limitations and difficulties of collecting and analyzing scientific data necessary for the practice of gerontological care to clients of social services.

The second aspect of possible didactic changes in the university education system is related to the need to develop “an information literacy” of students, which presupposes the competence of “critical ignoring”, i.e. the ability to identify information in the content of educational and auxiliary material that may not be used in the future and the skill of determining how and in what direction the student should realize his or her ability to concentrate attention on information in educational activities.

Selectivity in relation to available information underlies human cognition of the surrounding world as a whole. Therefore, “critical ignoring” is necessary for students to manage the information that they can obtain in the learning process. The didactic phenomenon of “critical ignoring” is structured in its content and includes two varieties: “intentional ignoring”, which determines the student’s conscious choice to ignore information of a specific type and nature in the learning process, and “unintentional ignoring”, which can be a tool for increasing the level of efficiency of student management of various information during learning (Kozyreva *et al.*, 2022).

Several strategies for implementing “critical ignoring” have been formed in psychological and pedagogical science due to the fact that various types of “problematic information” in students’ educational activities (distracting and low-quality information (distracting information and unreliable information) and accidental disinformation) imply the use of various strategies to reduce the negative consequences of their use of such information. Cognitive strategies that implement the need for “critical ignoring” and the circumstances in which they can be applied in the learning process can become part of teaching students the conditions, requirements, rules and norms of “an information literacy”.

In order to successfully implement the task of developing the competence of “critical ignoring” in students, one of such strategies is used - a cognitive strategy under

the conventional name “self-nudging”, in which one ignores temptations by removing them from one’s information environments. “Self-nudging” (“self-nudging”) assumes that the student “removes” from his “information environments” in the learning process irrelevant and non-functional information and data for him at the moment.

The main purpose of a cognitive strategy for implementing “critical ignoring” is not so much to optimize the use of information by students that is directly or indirectly related to education, but, above all, to offer them a number of measures that can help establish control over their individual information environment in the learning process and bring this environment into line with the goals and objectives of university education.

The “self-nudging” strategy performs the didactic function of a “cognitive impulse”, which develops university students’ abilities to analyze, design and construct their educational space in a way that is best suited for them at the moment. It should be borne in mind that the “self-nudging” strategy has its roots in psychological and pedagogical studies of the features and specifics of situational self-control in learning.

Based on the mechanisms of psychological and pedagogical interventions created as a result of applied research, such as “positional effects” (for example, making types of students’ independent preparation more effective), “default settings” (for example, making the results of students’ midterm assessment confidential by default) or “compliance with social norms”, the student’s choice of tactics for obtaining a university education is adjusted with the help of the cognitive strategy “self-nudging”, encouraging him to change his attitude towards learning and style of behavior in educational activities (Kozyreva *et al.*, 2022).

Thus, “self-nudging” gives students the opportunity to influence the circumstances of their presence in the educational space of the university. This opportunity is hypothetically determined by the fact that the “cognitive tools” used by the student to “separate” useful information from information that should be “ignored” can ideally be adapted to the educational environment in which these “tools” are used. In such an educational environment, the intensity of filtering and selecting information, as well as monitoring the influence of the surrounding socio-cultural environment, mainly depends on a number of accompanying didactic conditions.

As a result, an information literacy and critical thinking of students presuppose a concentration of attention during training on the formation and development of the competence of “critical ignoring”: choosing what exactly should be “ignored” in the information flow; learning how to counteract low-quality and misleading, but outwardly attractive for cognitive activity information; making decisions about where students should direct their developed ability to concentrate in educational activities (“the attention economy”) (Kozyreva *et al.*, 2022).

The didactic phenomenon of “critical ignoring” contains methodological grounds for analyzing its content from the perspective of a new paradigm for education. The development of “critical ignoring” skills in students during learning implies a paradigm shift in educators’ thinking: from emphasizing and concentrating on the idea of students’ obligation to show maximum interest in any information related to education during learning, to the idea of understanding the need for students to be able to manage and control certain information as a factor in successful and effective learning.

Such a possible a paradigm shift is explained by the fact that in the modern educational process, the abundance of information objectively creates a deficit of students’ attention. They are required to be able to optimally distribute this attention in conditions of an excess of those sources of information that can potentially be used in

learning. Therefore, the formation of critical thinking skills and abilities in students includes mastering the competence of strategic distribution of their attention resources in educational activities. The ability of future social workers to “critical ignoring” can be demonstrated when studying the content of an academic discipline “Theory of Social Work”, which includes knowledge of the concept of gerontological social work. The application of the main provisions of this concept is the basis for the effectiveness and technology of the practice of gerontological assistance to clients in social work.

3. Conclusion

The evolution of the methodological justification of gerontological social work in general and gerontological assistance to the population in particular can be presented as follows: gerontological assistance to the population as a state and indicator of stability and security in the life of an elderly person (corresponds to the knowledge of “social physics” in philosophy); gerontological social work as a concept denoting one of the qualitative characteristics of the social sphere of modern society (corresponds to “logic”); social gerontology as an idea of social culture, the idea of educating a person in a valuable attitude towards old age and behavior in relation to elderly people and the elderly (corresponds to “ethics”).

In the modern theory of social work, a distinction is made between “devident” and “deficit” models of gerontological assistance to clients of social services. The devident model involves creating such psychosocial and sociocultural conditions for an elderly person in the process of social services, under which the client is transformed from a passive object of social work into a subject of social activity, gets the opportunity to independently overcome life's difficulties, both their own and those of their immediate social environment.

As the experience of practical social work and training of future social workers shows, it is professional support for the level of social activity and the state of independence in life that contributes to the development of the subjectivity of elderly people, their self-realization. In other words, the methodological basis of the devident model is the value attitude to old age.

In turn, the deficit model of professional psychosocial and social assistance to elderly people involves the creation of such conditions under which their social services are mainly limited to material and household assistance. Such a methodological approach to gerontological assistance to clients of social services can potentially help encourage the dependent position of elderly people (Strizhitskaya, 2016). The starting point for the analysis of various aspects of gerontological assistance to the population in practical social work is the following fundamental position, which presupposes a corresponding philosophical and speculative understanding:

- the methodological foundations of the practice of gerontological social work are a set of concepts, scientific approaches, principles, theoretical models, with the help of which, on the one hand, a scientific and philosophical explanation of technologies, techniques and methods used in the professional activities of social workers, which have social and gerontological characteristics of their content and on the other hand, a scientific and theoretical justification of techniques and methods used in a comprehensive study of gerontological assistance to the population as a phenomenon of the social life of modern society and a phenomenon of modern university social education, occurs.

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