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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Be ready for the clash of powers: theorising power for teaching policy practice in social work

Být připraven k mocenskému soupeření: Konceptualizace moci pro výuku politické praxe v sociální práci

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of and trainings on policy practice in social work often focus on the normative and technical aspects of this type of social work intervention. Discussions do not delve sufficiently into concepts and aspects of politics, such as power, which are staple in the political science discourse. This theoretical article proposes situational, relational, and more individualistic conceptions of power relations that may be utilised in teaching policy practice in social work. The proposed understanding of power relations offers a method of training social work students to become well-prepared policy actors, and focuses on six areas of teaching policy practice: conscious analysis of the context of interaction with other actors; reflection on power differentials; the purposeful development of one's power differentials; thoughtful work with symbols of power; the selection of appropriate strategies for managing power clash and gaining power; and the new ethical issues connected with the above areas. Social work scholars and educators can utilise the offered conceptual frame for teaching future social work practitioners how to promote changes in particular social work institutional settings.

ABSTRAKT

Diskuse a příprava v politické praxi sociální práce se často zaměřuje na normativní a technické aspekty tohoto typu intervence v sociální práci. Důkladně se nediskutují aspekty politiky a koncepty, které tvoří jádro diskursu politických věd. Příkladem může být koncept moci. Předkládaný teoretický článek nabízí situační, vztahový a více individualizovaný koncept mocenských vztahů, který lze využít ve vzdělávání v politické praxi sociální práce. V textu představené porozumění mocenským vztahům nabízí možný způsob, jak připravit studenty sociální práce jako budoucí kvalitně vybavené aktéry politických změn. Text diskutuje šest oblastí vzdělávání v politické praxi: uvědomělou analýzu kontextu interakce s ostatními aktéry politiky, reflexi rozdílů ve zdrojích moci, cílevědomé budování vlastních zdrojů moci, promyšlené nakládání se symboly moci, volbu vhodných strategií pro zvládnání mocenských střetů a získání moci, a nakonec nové etické problémy spojené s předcházejícími oblastmi. Vzdělavatelé v sociální práci mohou využít nabízený konceptuální rámec pro přípravu budoucích sociálních pracovníků jako tvůrců změn ve specifických institucionálních podmínkách sociální práce.

KEYWORDS

Policy practice; power; policy change; power relations; typology of power clashes

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

politická praxe; moc; změna politik; mocenské vztahy; typologie střetů moci

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Introduction

Traditionally a domain of the more radical and activist social workers, the policy aspect of social work has developed significantly over the last two decades, and recently, policy practice has become an increasingly inherent part of mainstream social work; it is evidenced in the following examples: (i) articles and books on policy practice in social work are being published in peer-reviewed journals and prestigious publishing houses; (ii) groups of scholars involved in policy practice have been established; and (iii) social work students are now trained to promote policy changes (in some social work schools). From these sources, we can come to understand why policy practice is important (Figueira-McDonough, 1993), what current theoretical base(s) it has (Feldman, 2020), what the extent of policy practice is or could be (Colby, 2018), and who can make change and how (Ellis, 2008).

Although social work education can utilise examples of the exceptional practice of social workers promoting policy changes (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020; Weiss-Gal et al., 2020; Amann & Kindler, 2021; Zogata-Kusz, 2022), it still mainly focuses on shaping social workers' "service provider role" and social work students find themselves unprepared for policy engagement (Woodcock & Dixon, 2005; Burzlaff, 2020; Apgar & Luquet, 2022). Reflecting the development of the social work self-definition (Ornellas et al., 2018), it is sufficient for us now to understand that there are widely-shared assumptions about social workers as "social change agents" who struggle for a more just world and question constituted hegemony (Gramsci, 2000). The daily fulfilment of the global social work mission (The International Federation of Social Workers/The International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014) is, essentially, a day-to-day counter-hegemony struggle (Fraser, 2022). Undoubtedly, the social work political mission is ambitious. To succeed in policy arenas and to encourage social change and development, social work students must be knowledgeable about the power relations of which they will be part. That is why there is a significant need for comprehensive theorising on (i) what power is; (ii) how it arises, flows, and how structures overlap; (iii) how the nature of power relations in institutional settings is shaped; and (iv) how social work education can utilise power for the professional preparation of social work students as future social change agents, future policy actors (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2014; Aviv et al., 2021).

This article addresses the question of *how can the conceptualisation of power relations be utilised in teaching policy practice in social work?* Despite the fact that the paper is a conceptual article, the models of power relations and power clashes are also explained via the empirical examples that the author has inductively gathered during experienced social work practice (tables 1 and 2); these examples also come from routine life in a locality affected by the expressed event (table 3) as well as the practice of the author's colleague (table 4).

The formation of social work institutional settings

Historical institutionalists explain that human life is embedded in the routinely expected ways of solving or preventing particular human problems, otherwise referred to as institutions (North, 1990). Every society creates its institutions: in contemporary societies, we can identify health, education, justice, security, and the like. These are (1) expressed via specific *policies* formalised within distinct bureaucratic apparatuses (government ministries), and (2) run by *Departmental administrators* and specialised *workers* (professionals such as doctors, teachers, lawyers, and police officers). When people, for example, fall ill or are assaulted or threatened, they are able to then find help and support within the scope of these institutions, policies, and professionals. The thus described *horizontal institutional structure* simplifies the reality. Actually, there are no apparent boundaries among institutional sectors. Institutions and institutional sectors are liquid (Meyer, 2019): blurred, overlapping, and variable despite that they are created by formal policies, programmes, ministerial/departmental competencies, and professionals' roles.

Besides the horizontal structure, we can also delineate *the vertical institutional structure* as well. The above bureaucratic apparatuses play an essential role here. A pluralist perspective (Dahl, 1961) explains the division of bureaucracies via levels when decisions are made and distinguishes between supranational, national, regional, local/municipal, and street levels (Peters, 2012). It is known that regional and local levels may have varying degrees of in/dependence on/from the national and central government and its departments (Penninx, 2009). In democratic societies, the authority of a central government is partially limited (Peters, 2012), and a mixture of social and political actors with diverging interests can formulate, promote, and achieve common objectives (Torfing et al., 2012).

Before moving on, we must relate to the need for integration interconnection among the state, private bodies, and NGOs into our conception of institutional settings. *The cross-sector organisational structuration* is an output of the process called *agencification*, which is marked by the distribution of the duties of the state to more or less independent organisations or contractual agencies (Pollitt et al., 2004). To some degree, for-profit and non-profit organisations and agencies have gained autonomy from the state and governments. Therefore, diverse organisations and agencies create an organisational environment that is integral to particular settings of institutions described above. High officials, authorised representatives, managers, or specialists from the state, organisations, and agencies are important policy actors in specific horizontal and vertical institutional settings.

The just presented three-dimensional institutional structure represents *the social work institutional settings*. We can summarise that the social work institutional settings are full of complexity, blurred boundaries, overlapping authorities, variable difficulties, and changeable opportunities to influence policy.

Some readers may demur the idea of such complexity. They may say we live in neo-liberal times; thus, the neo-liberal zeitgeist and its hegemony make the social work institutional settings much simpler. I agree that social work as a profession has been continually under attack ideologically, politically, and financially (Garrett, 2018). Even in the most generous Nordic welfare states, the effects of neo-liberalism have forced social workers to change the nature of social work practice (Kananen, 2014; Marthinsen, 2019). However, resistance is possible. Based on past experiences with social work under Colonialism, Nazism, and Communism (Kunstreich, 2003; Lorenz, 2004; Špiláčková, 2014; Ferguson et al., 2018), a few social workers (and other professionals) participating in resistances maintained, often informally and at a significant cost, strictly controlled areas of life, including banned social institutions and organisations. Therefore, it is plausible to avoid such a simplification of the social work institutional settings and interpret them in an even more complex manner; this is due to the fact that they include some space for resistance (a counter-hegemonic struggle) in those institutional areas that are more deeply afflicted by the neo-liberal zeitgeist (Strier & Bershtling, 2016).

The positioning of social workers

Social workers practice social work in all institutional sectors, levels, and organisations. *From the horizontal view*, we can find social workers providing their demanding jobs in all institutions and organisations under the influence of various ministerial commands; in organisations such as hospitals, prisons, schools, rest homes, child protection agencies, and diverse state, region, or municipality departments of authorities. *From the vertical point of view*, social workers are (i) direct deliverers of services to people in need, (ii) administrators of social services, (iii) specialists with precious knowledge, and (iv) policymakers at the municipal, regional, and state level. *From the cross-sector organisational view*, social workers are mainly employees of public (state, regional, and municipal), non-profit, and for-profit organisations; thus they (i) are subordinated to highly varied organisational missions; (ii) fulfil various tasks dependent on various organisational aims; and (iii) experience diverse organisational cultures that shape their practice.

The three dimensional view on positioning of social workers produces a highly heterogeneous picture of social workers in positions subordinated to diverse institutional and organisational imperatives. Moreover, in varied positions, social workers can changeably either resist or yield to the neo-liberal hegemony (Strier & Bershtling, 2016; Feldman, 2022; Timor-Shlevin et al., 2022; Timor-Shlevin, 2022). Again, experience with social work in a totalitarian regime has shown the highly contentious relationship between social work and the nation-state and its prevailing ideology (Lorenz, 2004; Ferguson et al., 2018). Like many other professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, or teachers, some percentage of the social worker profession opt to follow a regime (un)consciously and become “agents of hegemony”, while others operate as “counter-hegemony agents”. Thus, even in the modern and seemingly nonviolent neo-liberal zeitgeist (Garrett, 2018), it is plausible to understand social workers as both (un)conscious agents of the neo-liberal hegemony (providers of neo-liberalised services) and, at the same time, counter-hegemony agents (critical, radical, and activist social workers).

Institutional and organisational imperatives, accompanied by the resistance to or compliance with the neo-liberal hegemony, create miscellaneous expectations connected to social workers’ ability to promote changes, which we understand as social workers’ power.

Power and the dynamics of power relations among policy actors

Power is probably one of the most ambiguous and vague terms in social science. Power is treated differently, and its meaning is changeable. Every field (political science, political philosophy, sociology, economics, or anthropology) and school (elitism, pluralism, Marxism, corporatism, professionalism, technocracy, post-structuralism, and feminist theory) is based on diverse foundations and emphasise various aspects of social and material reality when defining power.

Being focused on the policy practice of social workers, I hold an interactionist view focused on individuals in a particular context. In my understanding, power is an omnipresent element of social reality (Foucault, 1990) that determines organisation of social interactions among policy actors in particular institutional settings. Following Latour (1984), Whitehead (2010), and Arendt (2013), whose work on power helps to conceptualise it more individualistically, I am focused on (i) the perception of power differentials such as force, authority, influence, knowledge, or control of resources that leads to (ii) localisation of what has been constructed as “a power of someone” in social interactions. Nonetheless, let me start from the very beginning.

What is power? Power is not an institution, a structure, or the particular strength of an individual; power is not a rule leading to subjugation or a general system of domination (Foucault, 1990). It is an omnipresent element of reality that can be found in all social interactions. It is not in macrostructures; rather, it’s spread throughout the social system (Foucault, 1980). Even though power has a structural nature, it “is never anything more than a relationship that can, and must, be studied only by looking at the interplay of the terms of the relationship” (Foucault, 2006; as cited in Lynch, 2014, p. 21). While respecting the structural nature of power, which Foucault (1980) expressed via the composite term power/knowledge, I am focused on an interpersonal level where power manifests itself in relationships among people. In that sense, Arendt (2013) describes power as a ubiquitous power potential that springs up when people interact. In that sense, power is a situational, relational, changeable, and unreliable entity – a potential, potency, or capacity – helping overcome significant obstacles in a particular context. It refers to something that can modify or alter the world through our actions (Popitz, 2017); to something that needs to be actualised through interactions among people (Arendt, 2013). Power is neither just a chance to enforce our will against the will of others (Weber, 1978) nor ascendancy over (i) resources (Dahl, 1961), (ii) agendas (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970), and (iii) ideational components of reality creation (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016) or interests shaping (Lukes, 2005). In compliance with Foucault (1990), I believe that power cannot be possessed. Power is – not permanently – negotiated, given, and taken in social interaction among people.

Power is a situational, relational, changeable, and unreliable potency or capacity of social workers to promote desired changes (or prevent unwanted changes). It is obvious, however, that the concept of power itself is not very helpful in explaining the reality of political competition among actors in the social work institutional structure delineated above. What needs to be done in that matter is to shift our attention to power relations.

Whitehead (2010) conceptualised power relations as a competition among constructions of power based on a perception of power symbols. The *other* is situationally seen as powerful when (and only when) one acknowledges their potential capacity to do something. In interactions, power is exhibited through particular symbols such as a muscular figure, a gun, a suit, a title or degree, an articulacy, or wealth. Given the uneven distribution of power among actors, power relations are characterised by an asymmetry in the perceived potential capacity among actors. When the other is perceived as powerful, then they become endowed with power. Considering Latour's work (1984), different manifestations of power (perceived symbols of power) can be added that significantly influence the actual actions of actors; what matters is not what one is really capable of, but instead, what is believed in one's capacity to do something.

Using Figure 1 above, imagine a situation where actors A and B interact. Each of them carries certain attributes, which we understand here as "power differentials": they are both physically constituted in some way, hold a certain job position, have a certain education, enjoy a certain authority, earn a certain reputation, and have certain access to resources. They are bearers of two specific configurations of power differentials manifesting themselves through power symbols. As such, both actors perceive the other as specifically powerful. The social work institutional settings and situational context of their interaction contains a specific mix of the so-called "conversion factors" (see Sen, 1999, 2009), enabling the functioning of a particular combination of power differentials towards a gain of power. It causes, for example, the symbols of actor A can prevail. Consequently, actor B acknowledges actor A's potential capacity to do something and submit, which is the act of power endowing (see the illustration in Table 1).

Amartya Sen (1999, 2000) has described *the conversion factors* as personal and social aspects of reality, such as characteristics of individuals and social or environmental conditions, which *enable the conversion* of means into ends in the frame of individuals' day-to-day functioning. Besides, Sen has differentiated *conversion opportunities* from factors. Although these very similar aspects of reality directly do not enable the conversion, they *create favourable conditions for the potential conversion* of means into ends. I utilise Sen's conception as follows: suppose the conversion factors are present in the context of interaction among actors (see figure 1); specific mixtures of time, space, situation, and compositions of actors with their characteristics produce specific conditions, which are different for each interacting actor. While tempting, one cannot simply label these conditions as conversion factors because of differences between the conversion factor and the opportunity reside in the end – a real power gain, which means having potency or capacity to promote desired changes. Some of these conditions were conversion factors, and others were conversion opportunities for the actor who has successfully promoted desired changes. In contrast, for those actors who have not promoted changes, these conditions were just conversion opportunities or even conversion obstacles.

It is reasonable to consider the described social work institutional settings to be complex, making understanding power relations arrangement very difficult. Besides social workers and social work or social services organisations, many other professions and organisations enter policy arenas, knowledge platforms, inter-professional networks, or teams, and all of them are interested in promoting their ideas. There is no transparent and steady actor A and B competition, but rather multitude of actor A and B power contests – highly situational and changeable interactions among diverse actors from various institutional sectors, levels, and organisations. The power contest among actors can be understood as different kinds of clashes of power differentials through power symbols, which give rise to a particular actor's power.

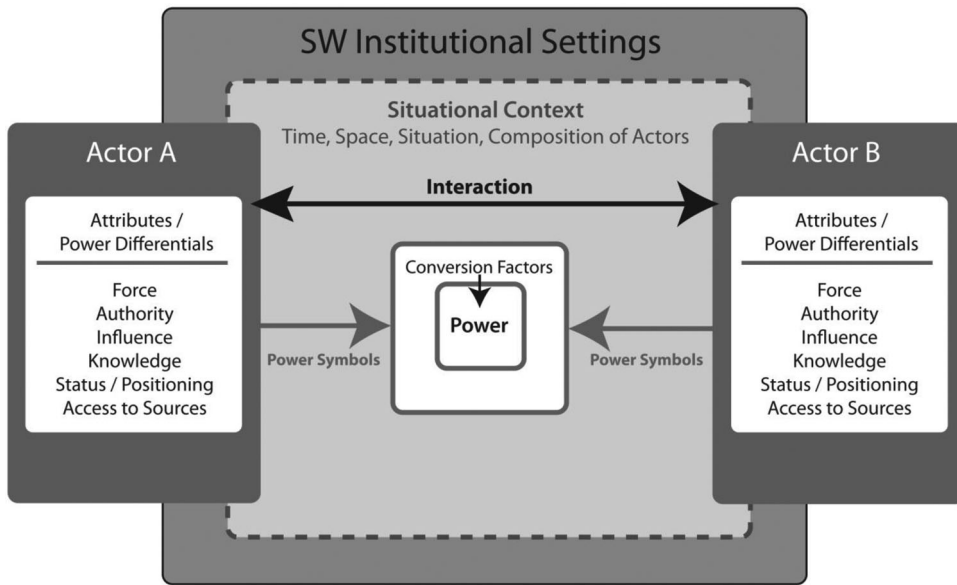


Figure 1. The dynamics of power relation Source: Author.

Clash of powers: the typology

Inspired by Carstensen and Schmidt (2016, 2018), I offer three ideal types of power clashes. Dahl's (1961) conception of power as the control of observable behaviour lays the foundation for thinking about *the bureaucratic clash*. Schattschneider's (1960) or Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) enhancements of the pluralist approach, in which agenda-setting and gatekeeping play an essential role, mark lines of *the institutional clash*. Finally, Lukes's third dimension of power (Lukes, 2005) and Carstensen and Schmidt (2016) conception of ideational competition offer a suitable basis for defining *the ideational clash*. I utilise the above knowledge to conceptualise three types of power clashes among policy actors while promoting desired policy changes (see figure 2).

First, *the bureaucratic clash* among actors is caused by the unbalanced intentional interactions among superior and subordinate actors while governing society or running organisations (Dahl, 1961; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, 2018). We suppose various power differentials to be activated during this clash. While the higher positioned actors can use their formal authority, access to resources, and the ability to distribute rewards and punishments (Dahl, 1961; Etzioni, 1961; Howe, 1986), the lower positioned actors, such as social workers, can use their specific knowledge, the complexity of the problems they solve, and the trust of the people they work with (Lipsky, 2010; Freidson, 1986; Howe, 1986). In this clash, interactions among actors take place in terms of *top-down and bottom-up competitions* resulting in coercion, resistance, or subjugation (see the illustration in Table 2). The notion of the bureaucratic clash has made the possibility of social workers' resistance more conceivable. In his brilliant study, Howe (1986) illustrated how labyrinthine and uncontrollable frontline work with children at risk has enabled social workers to resist managerial control. Also, more recent research indicates an array of possibilities in our highly neo-liberalised times (Strier & Bershtling, 2016; Feldman, 2022; Timor-Shlevin et al., 2022). Among other things, social workers can use their discretion and operate "under the radar" of ministerial control (Timor-Shlevin & Benjamin, 2022, p. 138); they can also focus more on important problematic aspects of peoples' lives than on prescribed procedures (Timor-Shlevin, 2022).

Second, besides coercion, there is dominion over societal problems, which has crystallised along with the routinely expected ways of solving or preventing these problems (the crystallisation of

Table 1. The empirical illustration of power relation.

A good example is the interaction between a social worker in the position of an administrator (head of a service operated by a State organisational unit under the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic) and the commander of a Local Unit of the Foreigners Police Department in a small city. They had a conversation about the nature of cooperation in working with migrants. The local police unit took a strict approach to migrants in the context of residency issues and was unwilling to include the broader circumstances of migrants’ lives in its decision-making. Police officers were more concerned with migrants’ compliance with legal deadlines and conditions than with the informal and illegal practices of hosts, employers, and intermediaries of various services. At that time, a change in the law was planned – the Foreigners Police Department had already been removed from the permanent residence agenda, and serious consideration was being given to taking the long-term residence agenda away as well. Police officers were experiencing considerable uncertainty about their future and were becoming more open to discussion and cooperation (it was unprecedented!). The social worker took advantage of this uncertainty and initiated discussions with the unit commander. During the contact hours, he found the commander in his office not properly clothed, without shoes, and very surprised by the undignified situation he was in. During the follow-up interaction, the social worker was allowed to demonstrate his knowledge of the problem and suggest solutions, including dividing tasks between the State organisation (social work) and the Foreigner police (law enforcement). It was possible to negotiate cooperation that significantly changed the local practices of the police department concerning migrants. Police officers then began to work closely with social workers and understood the situation of migrants more comprehensively.

While the configuration of the social worker’s power differentials matched favourably with the intention to negotiate, the commander’s power differentials were not adapted to this task. It was evident that negotiation was not part of his knowledge, training, or personality. The speaking power symbols on the part of the social worker were knowledge of the issues, appropriate language, a secure position in the formal structure of state administration, a solid appearance, and the resources available to secure the planned changes. The power symbols on the part of the commander were limited core language, uncertain status, the hole in his sock, knowledge focused on migrants’ shortcomings, and uncertain resources. In addition, the circumstances of the interaction were highly conducive to the social worker. The insecurity of the police officers caused by the planned change in the law and the insecurity of the commander when he was caught wearing a uniform inappropriately emerged as significant conversion factors.

formal and informal institutions). The *institutional clash* is shaped by the dominion over recognised problems (Meyer, 2019). Formal institutional arrangements and the authority of professions (Freidson, 1986) and specialists (Hayek, 1980) who have proved their ability to solve or prevent a particular recognised problem allow only selected actors to participate in policymaking. As such, mobilisation of bias, agenda-setting, and game-keeping are the main components of institutional power clash (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). In this clash, interactions among actors take

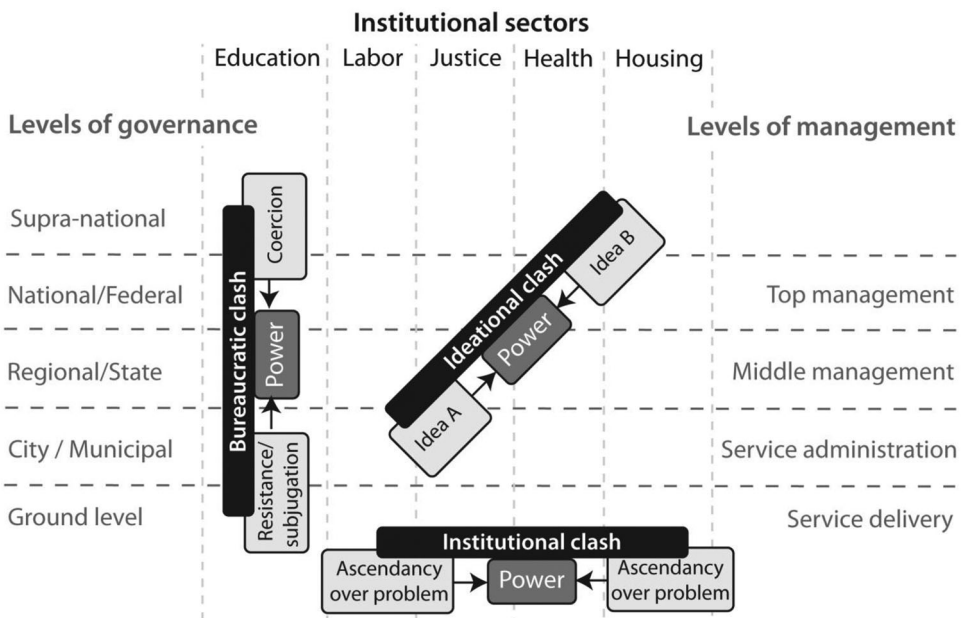


Figure 2. Three types of power clashes Source: Author.

Table 2. The empirical illustration of the bureaucratic clash.

A classic negotiation in redistributing subsidies for social services can demonstrate the bureaucratic clash. When a ministry or regional authority awards subsidies at a level where the provision of local social services is at risk, the affected organisation often responds by describing how many social workers it has and how many people they provide services to. At the same time, the affected organisation presents its willingness to close its services if the subsidy is not increased. The affected organisation takes advantage of its position in the local distribution of services and its perceived contribution to solving local problems. The organisational aspect of top-down and bottom-up competitions can be illustrated by a social worker who can offer management a solution to a problem with running a social service. The annual shortage of money and the emphasis on the quality of services provided are among the colours of social services in the Czech Republic. A social worker-administrator (who can secure co-financing in various projects and continuously develops the social service entrusted to him or her qualitatively) symbolically takes the burden of running a social service off the organisation's management. Such a social worker can significantly influence the organisation's environment and participate in management decision-making. Knowledge and the ability to deal with the economic pressures of running a service enables the social worker to resist management pressures and may even participate in management, either directly or indirectly.

place in terms of *horizontal cross-institutional competitions* (see the illustration in Table 3). The notion of the institutional clash sheds light on social workers' competition with other professionals and specialists. It is essential to understand that in particular social work institutional settings, institutionalised professional knowledge creates an ascendancy of a professional over a problem. In light of the fact that social workers do not dominate any institutional field but are instead spread throughout the institutional structure, they inevitably compete with, for example, physicians and health professionals in hospitals (Wilson, 2020), or tutors and psychologists in prisons (Hubíková et al., 2021), while activating their professional knowledge. Moreover, in neo-liberalised services, social workers compete with economists while negotiating for the budget (Timor-Shlevin & Benjamin, 2022).

Thirdly, the *ideational clash* is neither mainly vertical nor horizontal, but is actually demarcated throughout the social work institutional settings (see the illustration in Table 4). The competition among actors is about the mobilisation of myths, symbols, ideologies, and rumours that re-structure actors' interests (Lukes, 2005; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Moreover, affecting other actors' casual beliefs (ideas) directly through persuasion or imposition or indirectly by influencing the structuration of thoughts (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, 2018) is another crucial account in that matter. In this clash, interactions among actors take place in terms of *diagonal competitions among ideas*. The notion of the ideational clash uncovers the problem of ideology competition in social work. Bodies of

Table 3. The empirical illustration of the institutional clash.

An example is the absence of a representative of the municipality's social workers during a crisis management situation in a small town in the Czech Republic. Although the law imposes many essential duties on municipal social workers during emergencies, such as natural disasters or unexpected crises, crisis management involves politicians, police officers, firefighters, medical doctors, and psychologists – and not social workers. Social workers and their representatives do not participate in setting the crisis management agenda and are not part of multidisciplinary management teams. The absence of such a resource was immediately evident during the management and consequences resulting from the Covid-19 epidemic, the tornado in the South Moravia Region, or the migration crisis from Ukraine, where social work was not anchored in the rapid crisis response system. More specifically, local policy actors did not have accurate information about the potential contribution of social work professionals. In establishing the crisis management agenda, the other actors did not recognise the specific contribution of social work. Other professionals, who have more prestige in the Czech society and more professional power, did not allow social workers to participate in policymaking on local crisis response.

Table 4. The empirical illustration of the ideational clash.

The competition of ideas in implementing innovations in social services in the Czech Republic is a good example of the ideational clash. Innovators from diverse institutional fields and traditional social services providers compete at the national, regional, and local levels. The first ones promote innovative ideas of deinstitutionalisation, or housing first or wet centres (centres that allow clients to imbibe alcohol or use drugs), while the latter reject these innovations and highlight already proven solutions within the existing system. Innovators often use new ways of communication and participatory democracy tools. Besides, traditional providers use already well-trodden paths to decision makers. Around each idea, specific coalitions of actors have been formed using the available means to mobilise the ideational components of reality that will allow them to breakthrough.

beliefs manifest themselves in ideas of what is a problem, why is important to solve it, who should be involved, where they should operate and how, at what cost, and what are the expected benefits. These are mostly normative questions that produce normative answers. Social work innovations based on counter-hegemony principles such as social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities (IFSW/IASSW, 2014) produce ideas of recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Krumer-Nevo, 2020; Timor-Shlevin, 2022). These ideas compete with conservative and systemic ideas dominating a field (Chambon, 2013) and producing answers influenced by othering (Krumer-Nevo, 2020; Timor-Shlevin, 2022).

Obviously, all three clashes do not appear separately. In the demanding policy practice of social workers all clashes often come about simultaneously and overlap in various ways. How can we prepare future generations of social workers who will routinely enter policymaking for success in these clashes? If our ambition is to educate future social workers as policy actors, we must radically change social work education. The rationale behind this need is the actual reality of social work education that is ready to prepare professionals who deliver services, but not for those who supposed to be actively involved in policymaking. My suggestions follow the answer to question: *how can the conceptualisation of power relations be utilised in teaching policy practice in social work?*

Discussion: the suggestions for teaching policy practice in social work

The above understanding of power can be utilised in social work education in several ways; the elements of figures 1 and 2 above demonstrate this. Educators can increase students' competencies in the areas of (i) conscious analysis of the context of interaction with other actors; (ii) reflection on power differentials, whether it be one's own or others'; (iii) the purposeful development of one's power differentials; (iv) thoughtful work with symbols of power; (v) the selection of appropriate strategies for managing power clash and gaining power; and (vi) the new ethical issues connected with the above areas.

In the following section, I suggest a broad body of scholarship that may be useful for enriching a conceptual foundation that enables in-depth thinking about the policy engagement of social workers. Due to the limited scope of the paper, is impossible to add further references to additional prominent scholars who shape thinking in a particular field, discipline, or theory. Therefore, I offer just general suggestions of where to find suitable conceptual support.

Conscious analysis of the context of interaction with other actors is to analyse the context of the interaction among policy actors; educators neither rely on traditional socio-ecological theories that focus on the role of the environment while social workers work with people in need, nor on the critical theories focusing on social structure in terms of relations between powerful and oppressed. It seems appropriate to use the diverse streams of political science discourse that would imply a suitable addition to social policy, which focus mainly on systems of care, assistance, and support by appropriately selected elements of public policy. In public policy courses, students can gain knowledge about the nature of prevailing ideology and its hegemony, social and institutional structure, political actors, political processes, and changeable relations among these; students can learn how the structure, actors, and processes can be analysed and for what the results of the analyses can be utilised in social work practice. Knowledge of the nature of the context of interaction between actors is essential for understanding the dynamics of power formation; and in particular, knowledge of the specific configurations of time, space, situation, and composition of actors and their positioning is essential.

Reflection on power differentials focuses on an actor's individual attributes that enable them to acquire power under favourable conditions in a particular context. During their studies, students should acquire the conceptual and analytical equipment to critically reflect on their attributes to acquire power (and those of other actors) in a specific ideological, institutional, and organisational context. Looking at Figure 1, it is clear that we have encountered significant limitations here, as most of these attributes haven't been thoroughly conceptualised in social work. The meanings of

terms such as authority, influence, or knowledge are vague. Educators can design courses that remove the vagueness of these concepts while creating a framework that encourages critical reflection on specific configurations of power differentials.

Purposeful development of one's power differentials denotes that in addition to the awareness of power differentials, fostering students' understanding of their attributes in competition with other actors is also crucial. So, it can be seen that the purposeful development of one's configuration of power differentials is desirable here. If social workers want to be competitive over a long period in interactions with lawyers, doctors, managers, high officials, and others, then they must systematically develop their power differentials. Education can shape students' willingness to broaden and deepen their knowledge, nurture their reputation, build formal or informal authority, expand their access to resources, or reflect on their direct or indirect influence on other actors. It is an extension of the concepts of self-care and self-development to the level of policy practice. The day-to-day policy engagement of social workers implies specific demands on the personality of the social worker and their power differentials.

Thoughtful manipulation with power symbols is probably the most important, and likely ethically questionable. Education should prepare students to work consciously with those elements of their professional and personal role that speak to other actors and manifest their potential. In essence, symbol manipulation makes other actors believe that a particular social worker is the bearer of a preferred potential. In education, one can imagine specific courses developing social workers' (non-)verbal communication in the highly competitive environment of policy practice. Here, existing courses on communication with clients and concepts such as active listening can be appropriately used. However, they need to be expanded to include communication strategies in different types of political negotiations; this is where proved courses in political communication and persuasion come directly into play.

Strategies for managing power clashes and gaining power consider the high complexity of the context of possible interactions with other actors, future social workers will need effective strategies to manage bureaucratic, institutional, and ideological clash in a specific ideological, institutional, and organisational context. Theories of (neo)pluralism and managerialism offer several insights on building a conceptual framework of possible strategies to manage bureaucratic clashes. Theories of (neo)-professionalism or inter-professional and inter-organisational theories produce knowledge that enables the formulation of possible strategies for facing institutional clashes. Finally, discursive institutionalism and the diverse range of constructivist theories dealing with agency produce valuable knowledge for designing possible strategies for overcoming ideational clashes. Educators can formulate these possible strategies as certain theoretical assumptions about the course of competition between actors. Moreover, researchers can subsequently test and refine them in a present ideological, institutional, and organisational context, causing students to have validated guidance on how to enter, persist, and succeed in the clashes.

New ethical issues are being addressed through our proposals for social work education, as they indicate a possible rise of several ethical issues of well-elaborated policy practice in social work. Education should reflect this. New ethical problems and dilemmas directly related to a social worker's political role will need to be described. In particular, the area of the unintended consequences of acquired dominance in bureaucratic, institutional, and ideological clashes or the consequences of wielding gained power. It is essential to consider how easily power could be transformed into various forms of violence. Undoubtedly, future social workers should be aware of their enormous responsibility after gaining power. As powerful, social workers should sensitively recognise the thin red line that separates them from transformation into oppressors. Therefore, careful ethical training of students in political practice is a great challenge for educators.

Conclusion

The article contributes to policy practice discourse by offering a way to consider how social work scholars can enrich a conceptual foundation that enables in-depth thinking about policy

engagement by social workers. Moreover, there is a need to prepare students (future social workers) as policy actors routinely engaged in politics and policymaking. In that case, social work scholars and educators should have a suitable conceptual frame for teaching future social work practitioners how to promote changes in particular contexts. The demanding social work political role, a day-to-day counter-hegemony struggle of particular social workers, can be fulfilled if, and only if, social work practitioners routinely use a rich and proper conceptual gear to reach a deep horizon of understanding of how to succeed in a rough political competition in the neo-liberal zeitgeist.

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