

Foreword

Once again Rīga Stradiņš University Conference Proceedings presents articles prepared by scientists from different countries, which are traditionally combined by such themes as Society, Health, Welfare. The publication consists of 30 articles, which are presented in five parts reflecting the main idea of the conference. These themes have a broad integrative space; therefore, I want to emphasize the significance of publications in this issue for its innovative themes reflecting key changes in society, politics, and social work practice.

The first part of the publication, which is named **“Children and Youth Wellbeing”**, presents articles which reveal very subtle problems associated with the violation of children’s rights. In a situation of risk (due to disease, living outside home, homelessness, disability, violence, guardianship), children and youth want to be recognized and involved in decision-making. It is essential for individual’s socialization. The articles **“Children’s rights in healthcare: the influence of age on involvement”**, **“The realization of the children’s right of participation in the community children’s care home: the analysis of the children’s experiences”**, **“Children participation in the case management process”** are related to each other because of the children’s rights issue in various contexts. The provision of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was adopted in 1989, defines the child’s right to participate by expressing his/her own opinion and solving issues related to his/her life. A child is safe when a safe environment is created for him/her.

In the context of paediatric hospital experience, the Latvian researchers declare that healthcare professionals can create a safe environment for children in hospitals by involving children in discussions about their diseases and recovery process. A child is given the right to be involved in the solution of his/her health problem, while physicians are provided with new information on how to improve child-oriented care in healthcare institutions.

The research carried out by the Lithuanian researchers on children’s participation in Community Children’s Care Homes (hereinafter referred to as CCCH) showed that the experience correlates with approaches to communication problems identified in healthcare. Children have the right to be heard, but the main obstacles to the realization of this right are linked to the hierarchical position of workers, which leads to children’s lack of confidence in oneself and one’s own opinion.

Children’s rights issue is continued in another article prepared by the Lithuanian researchers, where the analysis of the case management practice is provided. In Lithuania, the process of case management, as a means of supporting children and/or a family, came into force in 2018. Lithuanian and foreign researchers promote the importance of children’s involvement in the process of deciding because a safe environment, social skills, and the ability to cope with stress is formed in this way. The experience of professionals shows that there is still no functional practice that allows children to participate effectively in the daily processes of their lives. In these articles, the need to share international experience is emphasized.

The experience of the Latvian social work professionals will be of interest to social work professionals and those who responsible for training social workers. The article **“Changes in the approach of social work with young people in out-of-home care in Riga”** reveals innovative approaches to youth problems. At the end of 2019, an innovative approach to social work with youth in out-of-home care was put into practice in Riga. To implement this, a new structure has been set up, which is the Youth Support Centre. In the article, the authors presented a study assessing the activities of the Youth Support Centre in terms of innovative social service management changes and professional training. Only dedicated professionals who can meet the unique needs and challenges of youth shape their attitude towards addictions, the importance of life skills and mental health maintenance. The experience of the Latvian researchers can contribute to the general welfare and prospects of youth not only in Latvia but also in other European countries.

Specifics of social work with young people experiencing homelessness will be of interest to both social workers and social policy makers. In the European Union, 20-30% of homeless people are youth of 18-29 years old. Homelessness is a concern for policy makers and society. The article presents a research which was carried out in Finland. A qualitative research method was used to analyse the causes and consequences of youth homelessness, to present the methods of social work with young homeless people and approaches to social workers' motivation. Skills necessary for working with young homeless people are empathy, understanding of an individual situation, ability to motivate a client, patience, knowledge of the law, ability to cooperate and work as part of a team. And above all - to be a realist and believe in a person.

In the articles **“Domestic violence and social services in Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Nigeria: comparative study”** and **“Social workers' role in the provision of services for families with children and youth with disabilities in Latvia, Slovakia, and Portugal”**, the results of international research are presented. The first article reveals that in countries where there are no laws, which could legally define domestic violence, the problem exists as a hidden problem. It creates major obstacles in solving domestic violence effectively. The legal definition of violence and cultural traditions play an important role in the understanding of violence. The research examines a multidisciplinary approach to domestic violence in Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Nigeria. The research method applied is in-depth interviews with professionals (16) from the countries mentioned above. The research also reveals that social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and doctors must work together in dealing with the complex needs of people in situations of violence. In the light of these conclusions, it is apparent that a multi-functional strategy is needed to solve the domestic violence problem, including cultural sensitivity, strong policies, adequate funding and coordinated professional efforts.

The following article is particularly of a sensitive character. The aim of the research is to investigate the role of social workers in providing support services to the families of disabled children and youth in Latvia, Slovakia, and Portugal. Although these three countries are members of the European Union and recognize the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), each country has its own laws governing the integration of people with disabilities into society. In each country, there are formal and informal forms of support. Social workers' role in the integration process of people with disabilities is vital. Social workers help families and individuals with a disability to develop social skills, advise communities in the creation and management of the strategy of the integration of people with disabilities into society, coordinate case management and planning, counselling, and coordination. Ongoing process of deinstitutionalization of institutions for people with disabilities has led to the adoption of national legislation which

brings new possibilities for the activity of social workers; however, it was observed in the research that this process progresses slowly, there is a lack of community support, the management and coordination of individual cases is stuck.

To summarize the first part of the publications, it can be said that the studies presented here, which highlight the rights of children and youth as well as demonstrate the importance of social work, are essential for answering to societal challenges.

The second part of the publication, which is named **“Health System Quality and Health Promotion Across Generations”**, provides a lot of scientific and practical information on issues being tackled in the healthcare system (children’s and young people’s health, detection of dementia, optimization of medical support activities, effective functioning of the healthcare system).

The articles **“Characterization of frequency of norovirus infection among hospitalized patients of Children’s clinical university hospital in 2021”**, **“Subjective health status, health behaviours, and high-risk behaviours as factors associated with adolescent mental health”**, **“Poor self-reported health in association with sleep duration and health complaints among adolescents in Latvia”** present studies on children’s and young people’s health problems in Latvia (children’s acute illnesses, young people’s mental health links to high risk behaviours, significance of sleep duration for subjective state of health, socio-demographic factors in the community). The research were carried out with the help of innovative survey and analysis methods (binomial logistic regression model, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)); the presented health status situations are based on statistical data from acknowledged databases; reliability of results is correlated with a representative sample of respondents. The community of healthcare professionals will be interested in the results due to their applied nature.

The research **“Transition from paediatric to adult epilepsy care: patients’ experiences of learning how to manage with epilepsy”** introduces the subtleties of the epilepsy phenomenon. The Lithuanian researchers present an original problem which is the management of epilepsy in the transition from childhood to adulthood. A child with epilepsy falls into the hyper-care of the family and thus one of the foundations of his development is taken away from the child – independence. It is forgotten that the child recognizes the world through experience. If parents run ahead of all child’s problems, once he/she grows up as an epilepsy patient, a child lacks knowledge not only on how to communicate with a doctor, but also about his/her disease: seizures, medication, medical procedures, factors provoking seizures. Knowledge about epilepsy, acceptance of the disease and the interaction between a patient and a doctor are prerequisites for the successful management of epilepsy during the transition period.

The article **“Psychometric properties of the Montreal Cognitive Assessment v8.2. test: pilot study”** is a bold challenge for the Latvian medical researchers with regard to the understanding of dementia phenomenon and diagnostics. As the world’s population ages, the number of people suffering from Alzheimer’s disease and dementia is increasing. There is a need for instruments that could diagnose a person’s cognitive disorder and distinguish the characteristic features of mild cognitive disorder from the signs of dementia. The aim of the Latvian researchers’ study was to examine the psychometric properties of the newly translated Montreal Cognitive Assessment test. The results of the research confirmed that the test can help identify patients’ impairments in one or more cognitive domains, but the pilot study should be continued. Researchers from other countries can also make use of this experience.

In the article **“Self-assessment tool for cross-sectoral health promotion”**, the Finnish researchers claim that the need to find sustainable solutions to complex health and welfare

problems in cities requires cross-sectoral cooperation. A self-assessment tool (SA), which can evaluate the condition of city's cross-sectoral cooperation, is introduced. Based on the evaluation of condition, the project Healthy Boost was implemented with funding from the ES Baltic Sea programme (2019-2021), where researchers from seven countries developed a model and tools to strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation. In addition to the structure of the model, the educational material, sets of best practice and workshop examples are presented. This international experience is easily applicable to health and welfare policy planning, improvement of city administration innovativeness, enhancement of the response to complex current and future health and welfare challenges in municipalities.

The research of Covid-19 pandemic phenomenon remains in the field of scientific interests. In the article **“The response of patient organizations to the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study in Latvia”**, the Latvian researchers share their experience of how the global COVID-19 health crisis has affected the activities of patient organizations. Qualitative research examines the content and accessibility of organizations' services during the first stage of COVID-19 pandemic in spring-autumn 2020 in Latvia. It can be stated that during COVID-19 pandemic, patient organizations went through a reality that became an experience that can be used in relevant situations even today.

In the presentation **“Using the Workload Indicators of Staffing Need (WISN) – Method to assess HR requirements and optimize processes in health care”**, the German researchers present the problem of balance between the engagement of doctors and the need for human resources in the health care system, which can be attributed to “eternal” problems. Based on a mixed method approach, using a systematic literature review, focus group-based experts discussions and interviews the WISN – method was applied to calculate human resource needs for a neurology team of therapists in a general hospital in Germany. The study aimed to identify specific optimization measures by calculating employees' personal time resources in support activities. There were identified three support activities (the management of daily and weekly paperwork, scheduling) which take 5,5 hours a week per therapist. The optimization of these activities through WISN creates added value which can be used for occupational health activities. It is concluded that WISN can help to increase the efficiency of healthcare. The method can be used in all areas of healthcare.

The research **“Process flows of an emergency department. How process modelling and simulation can help improve the efficiency and quality of patient care”** shows how emergency departments, despite their importance in providing life-saving help, face numerous shortcomings (for example, lack of resources, low level of digitalization, unregulated access to emergency departments). Coordinated process analysis with the help of discrete event simulation (DES) gives new opportunities in the optimization of emergency process. Based on empirical data obtained through observations, interviews with experts, the analysis of process and time study, the authors modelled and simulated the flow of patient care in the emergency department of a general hospital using a stochastic DES model. The results showed that discrete event modelling is the right tool for realistic modelling of complex emergency department systems. German researchers claim that the implementation of online DES models should be further investigated.

To summarize the second part of the publication, it is necessary to note that this part stands out for its specificity and will be of particular interest to professionals working in the healthcare system. It will be of interest to lecturers preparing specialists and students who have chosen the medical profession.

The third part of the publication, which is called **“Eco-social System Aspects- Impact and Benefits”**, presents a range of challenges in public life which have an impact on

relevant social groups. The article **“Narratives of social orphans in Latvia: using a life history methodology to listen to the voices of care leavers”** discloses the experience of youth, whom the authors describe as social orphans, after leaving institutional childcare homes. The research uses the methodology of life story. This methodology captures life experiences of 19 individuals after leaving institutional childcare homes. The experience of respondents demonstrated their life experiences before care, during care and life projections after care. For the analysis of data, thematic analysis was used. The results proved the deconstruction of stereotypes about orphan care. In the prevailing discourse of vulnerability in institutional childcare homes, the positive experience of living in an institutional childcare home, where one develops a sense of togetherness within a group, self-confidence, resistance to stress, is counterposed to the discourse of vulnerability. The authors also present the recommendations of former care receivers with an emphasis on the right to be involved in all life situations that affect their personal lives and future careers. It is a valuable study, and its results can be presented not only in Latvia but also in all EU countries as a dissemination of valuable experience and access to new innovative strategies for modelling social life of orphans after leaving the care institution.

The methodology of a life story correlates with the biographical narrative interview which was used by the author from Lithuania in the research **“Reflecting on biography as a factor in teachers’ self-development towards a welfare state”**. The author did not choose this topic by chance. One of the most important problems of the Lithuanian education system is a shortage of teachers. Many reasons can be given to explain this problem (low salaries, heavy workload, the status of a teacher in society). The research presented in the article, which emphasizes the approaches to the choice and calling of a teaching career, is very timely. The results of the research suggest that the perception of teaching career choice and calling might be linked to biography, childhood interests, awareness of one’s needs, and the development of abilities and skills can unlock pedagogical potential. Educators can influence this potential to establish itself and help young people discover their calling. A teacher by calling, reflecting on his/her experience, can ignite students’ passion for teaching. This is essential because a teacher educates the younger generation which will take care of society’s welfare in the future.

The articles **“The negative impact of poor health on civic participation in older adults of the Baltic countries”** and **“Social work perspective in integrated care for elderly people with chronic diseases”** present studies related to the problems of old and elderly people. In the context of the Lithuanian situation, the researchers reveal the impact of poor health on older people’s activity in the Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia). Health status has an impact on a person’s social life isolation. Elderly people with chronic diseases live even more isolated lives. Social services are more about meeting primary needs because it is difficult for a social worker to perform professional duties in the context of integrated services due to bureaucracy, insufficient funding, lack of interprofessional teamwork and cooperation.

The research **“Social workers’ experience working with refugees during Covid-19: Case of Austria”** indicates the social isolation of yet another group at risk (refugees). The experience of social workers working with refugees during Covid-19 in Austria is presented in the context of a full range of issues (increased workload, limited communication between both refugees and social workers, inability to respond to the needs of refugees to study, work, help provide housing, lack of IT facilities, uneven planning of daily work). The authors emphasized the significance of social work and pointed to social worker’s difficulties to retain clients. Key findings: restrictions imposed at the time of Covid-19 pandemic increased the isolation and vulnerability of refugees as well as caused chaos.

The study “**Analysis of dietary behaviour in physically active persons’ cohort**” is targeted at a specific group of people who need to know that to maintain equal physical and psychological load, it is necessary to have a balanced diet. The study group consists of active people with an average age of 24.7 years. The participants had a nutrition education course (8 academic hours). After completing the course, the participants of the study group filled in a standardized questionnaire and completed a standardized survey allowing researchers to evaluate energy consumption and recovery approaches in daily life. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical rules of data acquisition and processing. Given the fact that nowadays, society is interested in healthy lifestyle and nutrition, which maintains health and physical condition, the results of the study could be used to develop appropriate nutrition planning prior to planning of increased physical and psycho-emotional loads both individually and in groups.

The organizers of the conference also made room for ergonomic issues. The fourth part of the publication, which is called “**Ergonomic Risks and Environmental Health**”, is dedicated to that. Although this part contains only 2 articles, it is just the tip of the iceberg since all economically active people face the problem of ergonomics at work. Ergonomics is not just about the correct body position at the workplace. Good ergonomics requires a holistic approach to sound ergonomics, light ergonomics, cognitive ergonomics, movement, and activity ergonomics. Failure to comply with the provisions of ergonomics leads to the development of chronic occupational diseases during the relevant period of professional activity which often becomes the cause of industrial accidents and incidents. There are very few studies on ergonomic occupational risk factors. These problems seem obvious, but their solution requires both legal and administrative measures, as well as the assessment of risk factors of workers.

The Latvian researchers confirm that the study presented in the article “**Reducing sedentary behaviour in office workers – motivational factors and barrier**” is original because different motivational factors between place of work and possibly between sitting time and the specific age groups were investigated for the first time. All age and sitting time groups agreed that the motivational physical activity system developed and presented by the employer, if it would actually work, would be a positive prerequisite for the management of ergonomic occupational risk factors. Intensive work tasks are the main obstacle preventing office workers from physical activity at work (59% of respondents), which is the problem of management.

The Estonian researchers continue the issue of management raised by the Latvian researchers in the article “**Fire fighters’ psychosocial risks and physical fitness: evidence-based study from Estonia**”. This study once again emphasizes that the ergonomic safety of workers depends on the management of an employer. The work of firefighters is very responsible, but also involves psychosocial risks. In the context of ergonomics, it is necessary to ensure the stability of shift work for those in this occupation and to develop the strategy for improving physical and mental health (healthy nutrition, systematic physical activity, adequate sleep duration, professional motivation, fairness, respect, balance of personal and professional life). The study lasted for 2 years (2018-2020). Quantitative and qualitative studies were carried out using COPSOQII tools of Danish Institute of Occupational Health to assess psychosocial risk factors in the work environment. The results made it possible to create an appropriate professional culture model having influence on health and safety management, firefighter’s labour productivity. The model can serve as a way of disseminating Estonian ergonomic experience.

The fifth part of the publication **Digitalization in Social Work - Opportunities and Challenges** presents innovative articles about the expression of digitization in everyday and

future social life. In the period of Covid-19, digitalization became a real challenge in social work. The article **“Prevalence of sexting in children and adolescents in Slovakia in the pandemic and post-pandemic period (in the context of demographic characteristics)”** will be of interest to educators and professionals researching bullying. Research on this topic has increased significantly in recent years. In the study, the researchers from Slovakia and Israel pointed to the presence of sexting phenomenon among youth during the pandemic period when we lived in subjective isolation. The study was extended to the post-pandemic period. The questionnaire EU Kids was used. The analysis of the results was performed by assessing the age, gender, and social structure of the children’s families. In the post-pandemic period, sexting has decreased. The study is interesting in the context of cyberbullying. The results of the study demonstrate the importance of social worker’s activities in schools in modelling appropriate prevention and psychological intervention measures.

The studies **“Digitalization in the provision of social services: rural counties perspective”** and **“Older adults’ digital inclusion: new challenges for Lithuanian social policy”** conducted by the Latvian and Lithuanian researchers seem to complement each other. Digitalization affects all social sectors, its significance is particularly important in the context of social work, the provision and accessibility of services. For social service providers (in a broad sense), this is both an opportunity and a challenge. The adaptability of the digital space for the provision of social services affects the availability of services. And although digitalization is a state platform, the provision of social services is an independent function of each municipality. The article presents the results of the digital literacy study of Latvian social service providers working in rural areas. The study instrument is based on Citizens’ Digital Competence Framework (Digi Comp 2.1). The results revealed that digitalization is a challenge for people living in rural areas, in particular those at risk. Lack of digital skills becomes a social problem. Social workers in rural areas must become digital literacy facilitators for their clients. The Lithuanian researcher seconds the Latvian researchers by stating that older people, not only in rural areas but also in cities, lack the skills to use digital technologies which are necessary for the successful functioning of society. Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalization process and presented opportunities for the online transmission of a wide range of services. Several scientific studies showed that a telephone, and less often a computer, has become the main work tool for many home care workers. Such a situation indicates a new demand for the development of digital social services and a new approach to social policy.

The last article of this part is **“Current options and limits of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in social work”** which presents an original and timely problem. Can robots replace social workers? Social work requires meticulous and individual assessment of a person’s needs and risk situation. Each client of a social worker is a personality with feelings, specific life experiences, dreams and, in a situation of risk, with a hope to solve problems. A chatbot introduced in the study is an innovation but with limited capabilities that are programmed into its functions. The Slovak researcher analyses the approaches to the use of robots in a very subtle way and states that the use of chatbots has not only advantages but also dangers. Robots could facilitate the work of social workers through the performance of physical tasks (putting a client into a wheelchair, assisting with bed transfers, getting them into a car). As the author has mentioned in the discussion, we believe that chatbots and digital technologies are currently incapable of overcoming certain limitations and replacing social workers. It must be acknowledged that we are at the beginning of an exponential development in this area. To support the author’s further

search, I would leave an open question which sounds like this: “Is a mission to create a robot social worker (im)possible?”

Article **Digital social work or e-social work? Towards social work in a digital environment** belongs to the author of the previously presented article from Slovakia. In this study, the researcher tries to reveal the terminology of social work in the digitalized space. Definitions *digital social work* and *e-social work* are not identical. Each definition has its own content. Therefore, the author reveals innovative approaches how to adapt social work to the digital environment and analyzes the already existing social work practices in a digital environment. Covid-19 forced social workers to use IT technologies and this implied new practical communication approaches for the social worker. The author does not think that digital social work is a new discipline of social work, because a social worker, even when using digital technologies, will apply existing social work methods. Digital social work requires learning new communication skills and asks for a more innovative application of new work methods. The author’s recommendation is to actualize digital literacy education in the studies of the Bachelor’s Social Work program. Summarizing his scientific and practical insights, the author reviews the benefits and drawbacks of social work in a digital environment and highlights a new approach for the social worker to support clients understand technologies and encourage its use in everyday life at both the micro and macro levels.

At the end of the foreword, on behalf of all future readers of the publication, I would like to thank the members of the Scientific Editorial Board, Scientific Editorial Council and the authors of the articles for the opportunity to get acquainted with interesting theoretical and empirical findings. It can be stated that the publication is a scientific product and it reveals the possibility for scientists to create new intellectual and organizational paradigms that respond to the current issues and challenges of today’s society.

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