

SOCIAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES FOR IMMIGRANTS: THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN LITHUANIA

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ABSTRACT

Intensification of migration flows makes Lithuania one of the immigrants host countries which, like other European Union countries, faces the challenge of integration of immigrants and in this process an important role has a social worker. The aim of research was to reveal the social support strategies used by social workers in solving social problems of immigrants during the process of their integration. The qualitative research using semi-structured interview method and content analysis method was done. The survey results suggest that immigrants during the process of integration face these social problems: the search for housing, employment, legal, financial, lack of access to relevant information. The results revealed that social workers, solving the social problems of immigrants, evaluate their nature and level and then apply the appropriate level of intervention. Social workers apply these micro level interventions: information and consultancy of immigrants, mediation and emotional support, which include individual social assistance. Social workers, solving the social problems of immigrants, apply these mezzo level interventions: development of social network of immigrants, organization of socio-cultural events, organization and coordination of volunteer activities. Social workers providing social assistance to immigrants' integration process, use the following macro level interventions: dissemination of information on immigrant issues, conduction and dissemination of researches based on immigrant integration issues, dissemination of best practice of social workers.

Keywords: immigrant, integration, social problem, social support strategies, social worker.

Introduction

One of the features of modern society is increasing migration mobility of the population. The arrival of immigrants and the process of their integration is a significant challenge for politicians, employers, welfare services, education or other specialists and the societies of host countries all over the world. This is typical for Lithuania as well. According to the European Migration Network statistics provided, 29 601 foreigners lived in Lithuania at the beginning of 2011 (Migration in Lithuania: Facts and Figures, 2011), 30 521 foreigners in 2012, while at the beginning of 2013 – 33,267 foreigners lived in the Republic of Lithuania. This amounts to 1.1 percent of the population of the Republic of Lithuania. During the last half of the year the amount of foreigners increased by 2.5 percent: nationals and their family members from the European Union Member States and the European Free Trade Association Member States comprised 9.3 percent, third-country nationals - 1.7 percent. Research has shown that the Lithuanian population is not positively disposed to immigrants, especially to foreigners arriving from non-EU countries: the majority of the population of Lithuania (57.8 percent) thinks that migration to Lithuania is a negative phenomenon and only 18.8 percent think about it positively (Sipavičienė, Gaidys, Jeršova, 2010). Three-quarters of the Lithuanian population (64 percent) support the view that "the state should prevent the concentrated accommodation of aliens in territory of Lithuania", more than half (59 percent) say that "the state should strictly limit the number of foreigners who come to Lithuania from non-EU countries" and "should strictly define the countries from which aliens, who are non-EU citizens come to Lithuania (54 percent). (Beresnevičiūtė, Leončikas, Žibas, 2009, p. 89). Recent research in Lithuania (Bartkevičienė, Raudeliūnaitė, 2012) indicated that immigrants in Lithuania lack the measures of integration: necessary information about the

residence in Lithuania; guidance (job search, legal and social issues); state language courses and representation of social interests of migrants. The results of research revealed the measures of integration, which facilitate the further integration of immigrants in Lithuania: public announcement of information, which promotes social participation of immigrants; development of inter-institutional cooperation, in order to ensure social participation of immigrants; development and improvements in social policy, what enable the integration of immigrants into the Lithuanian society; presentation of Lithuania in the media; organization of events, which promote mutual understanding and communication; the development of strategies aimed towards Lithuanian language teaching / learning and employment.

The integration of immigrants is problematic and becomes an object of permanent scientific and political discourse in different countries all over the world. J. W. Berry's was the first (1997) who developed a theory that an adaptive individual, who comes into contact with the host culture, selects one of four strategies of acculturation (assimilation, segregation, integration and marginalization). M. Korac (2001) argues that integration is a *dialogue-based* process, which includes newcomers and the host society's two-way communication and mutual adjustment. A similar view is shared by T. Martikainen (2005), who argues that integration is the process by which new arrivals become the members of existing socio-political community and are included into different social structures of the host society. During this two-way process arrivals seek to preserve their cultural identity and the host society seeks to adjust to them.

In a political discourse integration is defined as a two-way process, which involves the host community and immigrants, requires mutual commitment and includes the rights and obligations of both parties. Thus, this process requires both the willingness of immigrants to take responsibility for integration in the host society and the host society's willingness to accept and integrate immigrants (New European Agenda for the Integration of Third – Countries Nationals, 2012). In this agenda is noted that integration should be seen and recognized as an ongoing process rather than as an intermediate step. Integration should be seen as the outcome of a process that enables third-country nationals to live independently without external support and gain a social status similar to the status of citizens of the country in which they live and the status of citizens of other European country. Quelle (2002) argues that the process of immigrant integration consists of four phases: selection, settlement, adaptation and contribution. Selection of the country to which a person intends to immigrate is made in a native country, while the other three phases occur upon arrival to a new country. Settlement includes the time immediately after the arrival, when immigrants face the need for housing, children's school and the first job. This period is often characterized by dependence on the services provided. The phase of adaptation begins, when immigrants satisfy all their urgent needs related to entry and begin to generate their long-life strategy related with permanent residence in a chosen country (for example, after decision, where they intend to live for a long time, what kind of career they are going to achieve). This phase is characterized by growing personal autonomy of immigrant. The last step of integration of immigrant, i.e. contribution, occurs, when immigrants reach their targets in terms of social status, employment and feel comfortable in a new country, as it were "at home". This phase is characterized by the fact that institutional support becomes irrelevant to immigrants and they voluntarily contribute to the activities carried out by institutions. It should be noted that many immigrants face various (educational, social, employment, medical, legal) problems during the process of integration in a new country. Many studies have confirmed that immigrants lack the language skills of the host country and that reduces their competitiveness in a labor market, creates difficulties for new social relations with the host society. Also, immigrants face the problem of intolerance of society and suffer various forms of discrimination (racial, religious and social). It is important to emphasize that in the process of immigrant integration an important role plays a social worker, because after arriving to a new country immigrants face social problems during the process of integration (Potocki-Tripodi (2002), Matikainen (2003), Valtonen (2008). Hernández-Plaza, Alonso- Morillejo, Pozo- Muñoz (2006) revealed the importance of social support interventions in the integration process of immigrants, emphasizing an intervention level, structure and functions and specified the social worker's activities that focus on specific integration measures. Jae-Sung Choi, Soochan Choi (2005), Nash, Wong, Trlin (2006) revealed the importance of interventions at micro, mezzo and macro levels made by social workers, when solving the problems of immigrant integration, with particular attention to the aid of non-governmental organizations in the proper selection and application of integration measures.

The social problems, which face immigrants during the integration process, the opportunities of social worker, who works with immigrants, are poorly investigated in Lithuania. Ongoing scientific discourse is mainly focused on trends and dimensions of social integration, policies of immigration and integration, and the assessment of

levels and structure of integration of immigrants (Beresnevičiūtė, 2005; Žibas, 2009; Beresnevičiūtė, Leončikas, Žibas, 2009). Consequently, **problematic questions** originated: what kind of social problems of immigrants social workers solve? What interventions social workers apply, when they act with social problems of immigrants?

The aim of research – to reveal the social support strategies used by social workers in solving social problems of immigrants during the process of their integration.

Research methods

In order to explore the social problems of immigrants and the ways that social workers use to help immigrants in the process of integration, a qualitative research strategy was chosen. A semi-structured interview method was applied. Interview questions covered the following topics: 1. Social problems of immigrants for which they apply to the social worker. 2. The strategies that social workers use to help immigrants in solving social problems. Obtained data were analyzed by the content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis was carried out in accordance with the inductive, study data based and categories composed logic. The qualitative analysis of content was based on this consistency (Creswell, 2009): the multiple reading and reconsideration of data, data coding, grouping the codes into categories / sub categories, the integration of categories into the context of the analysis of a phenomenon and description of its contents.

Research sample

The study involved six social workers, who with reference to their experience gave their opinion about the social problems of immigrants and the ways of solutions. The selection of target group was objective, i.e. social workers, whose working experience was at least one year and who had a higher education in social work.

Research ethics

A qualitative study was carried out without prejudice to the rights of study participants, and in accordance with the principles of research ethics (Howe and Moses, 1999): the study participants were aware of the study purpose and research data collection methods, they were guaranteed the right to be undamaged (without personal questions that could harm subjects); all the participants agreed voluntarily to participate in research; they were guaranteed confidentiality (participants were informed that participation in research and the data will not be used against them in the future). In order to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants, their names were encoded by a letter.

The results of research

Data analysis has revealed two qualitative categories: social problems of immigrants and social support strategies used by social workers: intervention at micro, mezzo and macro level. The study has showed that the spectrum of social problems of immigrants is wide (Table 1).

Table 1. Social problems of immigrants for which they turn to social workers

Interview Extracts	Subcategory
... immigrants come to us directly from the plane, because they do not know, where to look for accommodation ...;... after coming to Lithuania immigrants do not have a place to stay, so the problem of housing is significant and I think, help in finding accommodation is one of the most important ...	Housing problem
... it is very important to find a job in a foreign country, so our help is very important; ... they do not know, where to look for a job, do not know about Labor Exchange office, do not know, how to prepare a CV; ... if someone does not know Lithuanian or Russian language, it is particularly difficult to find a job in Lithuania ...	Employment problem
... difficulties associated with migration issues, which usually depend on the reason of alien's arrival to Lithuania, often arise: renewal of residence permit, getting a work permit and also their rights in Lithuania and so on...	Legal problem
... they come to Lithuania with the family and children, children should go to school, but there is only one English school and, in addition, it is very expensive, and immigrants often do not have such money...; ... they come with a limited family budget, but in order to learn Lithuanian language, they need to attend a course, and as we know, courses are paid and often immigrants simply do not have money ...	Financial problems
... they do not know, where to get information ... ; ... they turn to us because they want to find, where they can learn Lithuanian language for free ...; ... we have no information stands for immigrants ...; ... on arrival, immigrants need clear and correct information immediately...	Immigrants lack the access to relevant information

One of the social problems of immigrants is a **housing search**. Immigrants turn to social workers, when they are looking for accommodation because they face a language barrier problem, as well as the lack of information about the housing search capabilities. Very often, the Lithuanians do not want to rent an apartment to an alien, because they have a negative stereotypical view of foreigners, so a social worker in this situation is an agent who calls a tenant, tells the situation and vouches for the alien, who is looking for an apartment. Then he goes together to inspect the apartment. The social worker's help to find an apartment for rent makes the process a lot easier than it would be for a foreigner alone. The second social problem of immigrants is the **problem of employment**. The results of research have showed that immigrants do not know what authority they should apply for a job, having a minimum of Lithuanian language basics they cannot develop curriculum vitae and also face the lack of CV preparation skills. Social workers help immigrants to prepare CVs, provides with information on how to prepare a successful cover letter, look for job postings, contact potential employers and, if necessary, accompany immigrants to meetings with employers. The third social problem faced by immigrants is a **financial problem**. The results have showed that the financial situation of immigrants is often difficult, particularly of those, who come with their families (children), because the cost of their livelihood usually is higher: they need a bigger accommodation and funds for children's education, and so on. Immigrants, who want to attend an intensive language course, have limited financial opportunities, because after arriving to a new country, first of all they must find housing and a job and also their wages do not allow them to buy a language course. In such cases, Lithuanian social workers and volunteers organize activities for immigrant children. Also the social workers of Lithuania develop and implement projects and due to them organize state language courses for free. Thus, immigrants do not need extra money for language learning. The fourth social problem faced by immigrants is **legal problems**. The research has showed that immigrants face problems of legal residence validation in Lithuania. These problems arise due to ignorance of the rights of immigrants. Experts try to explain to immigrants, what rights do they have, but immigrants understand that ambiguous because they have a language barrier and also immigrants do not understand the legal consequences of legal default. In such cases, a social worker helps immigrants to fill necessary documents and cooperates with the Migration Board personnel on legal issues of immigration. Social workers have to go and explain situation, they represent aliens and try to ensure that the solution of problem goes in the right direction. The fifth social problem of immigrants is **the lack of access to the information, which is important for immigrants**. The results have showed that immigrants feel the lack of information about living in Lithuania. In this case, a social worker must be prepared to provide different information on the following topics: public transport system, low-cost telecommunication companies, free education, the opportunities of vocational education, health and social welfare, employment opportunities,

the rights and responsibilities of immigrants. These trends were also reflected by Hernández-Plaza, Alonso-Morillejo, Carmen Pozo-Muñoz (2006), who claimed that a social worker solves the social problems of immigrants related to their legal status, access to education, health and social services, employment, accommodation, participation in social and community life.

The research has revealed that social workers, acting with social problems of immigrants apply the interventions on micro, mezzo and macro level (Table 2).

Table 2. Social support strategies used by social workers in solving the social problems of immigrants

Interview Extracts	Subcategory
... ask questions, how to register a marriage or the birth of a child, how to buy a car ...; ... must be ready to provide different information on issues such as: public transport system, low-cost telecommunication companies, free education ...; ... I help to prepare resumes, provide information on how to prepare a successful cover letter ...; ... advice on a variety of issues, from where to buy clothes, footwear to what kindergarten should a child go to ...; ... advise on the legalization of diplomas, because their diplomas are not recognized here ...; ... often consult with the labor exchange specialists on work permits, the availability of jobs ...; ... students with serious health problems have to pay for the medical services themselves, which is hard to do without a job. In this situation, a social worker can only find cheaper medical services and help to register ...; ... direct to specialists, who can consult on legal, business and other issues ...	Information and consultancy of immigrants
... have to deal with job search issues, call to offices, help to write a CV, arrange conversations ...; ... mediate in finding accommodation, because many can not communicate and we have to call, arrange a meeting, to negotiate and so on. ...; ... help to find an apartment, guide, interpret ...; social workers are mediators between an alien and public; ... they accompany immigrants to the authorities ...	Mediation
... social worker is someone, who listens and is with immigrant together, because he is the first person, whom meets an immigrant when he comes to organization and who provides an assistance to foreigner on arriving ...	Emotional support
... foreigners, who come to Lithuania, often try to contact people of their ethnics. Therefore, a social worker tries to organize and maintain networks of foreigners, that the foreigners could turn to each other and to share their experiences of life in Lithuania ...	Development of social network of immigrants
... we organize a number of events in order to familiarize immigrants with Lithuanian culture and festivals. We organize discussions ...; ... organize parties, we organize different types of events .; ... a variety of informational events, festivities, discussions ...	Organization of socio-cultural events
... we look for volunteers who can teach immigrants the Lithuanian language, can help to organize cultural events ...; ... organize training courses for volunteers, so that they can provide the necessary assistance to immigrants ...	Organization and coordination of volunteer activities
... organize conferences, where present their problems .. try to organize the "International Migrants Day each year and invite the Lithuanian Parliament members, representatives of various departments, governmental and non-governmental organizations, seek to draw attention to their problems ...; ... participate in various television shows, which present their problems, participate in radio shows ...; ... try to communicate with the media and inform the Lithuanian people about their problems...	Dissemination of information on immigrant issues
... investigate and analyze the needs of immigrants aiming to solve their integration problems ...;... organize conferences and present the results of researches ...; ... work on projects aiming for comprehensive assistance to immigrants residing in Lithuania ...	Conduction and dissemination of researches based on immigrant integration issues
... we participate in seminars organized abroad, where we share our experience in working with immigrants,; ... we go abroad to acquire new knowledge and practical experience ...; ... cooperate with similar organizations abroad, because we want to use the experience of other countries in development of social services for immigrants ...	Dissemination of best practice of social workers

Social workers, solving the social problems of immigrants, apply these micro level interventions: *information and consultancy of immigrants, mediation and emotional support*. Social workers provide **information** on health care, legal and business issues, the authorities which provide assistance to immigrants and **consult** about housing search, employment, home economics, the validation of education, children and adult education. Social workers **act as intermediaries** by providing social assistance to immigrants. Usually, they mediate to immigrants and landlords, immigrants and employers, immigrants and the public. They also accompany immigrants to various institutions. It is important to note that social workers provide **emotional support** for immigrants, recognizing their feelings by listening and empathizing to the state of client. Social workers should be empathetic and very supportive. They should believe in themselves and the person to whom they help, do not resist, when face a negative view on foreigners. The study findings are consistent with findings of other researchers (Potocki-tripod, 2002, Hernández-Plaza, Alonso-Morillejo, Carmen Pozo-Muñoz, 2006; Logger, Paulsen, Rothfus, 2006; Valtonen, 2008) that immigrants who come to a new country should be given the social support at the micro level: information and consultancy about finances, housing, social, health and education systems, labor market issues; mediation at various institutions and they should be provided emotional support.

Social workers, solving the social problems of immigrants, apply these mezzo level interventions: *development of social network of immigrants, organization of socio-cultural events, organization and coordination of volunteer activities*. In their practice work social workers try to help immigrants **to establish and maintain social ties with their ethnic community**, in that way immigrants can share information and personal experience gained in solving various social problems, to discuss political, economic and social events in their home country and get mutual emotional support. Also, social workers organize **socio-cultural events**, where immigrants can realize their personal ethnic and cultural self-training, reach socio-cultural integration with other ethnic groups and the internalisation and externalization of ethno-cultural values could be reached. In their practice work social workers, solving the social issues of immigrants, **organize and coordinate volunteer activities**. Volunteers are involved in the process of social assistance, as they perform a social worker's assistant role: help to organize cultural, educational and recreational events, teach immigrants Lithuanian language, mediate to immigrants who are seeking housing and translate.

Social workers, solving the social problems of immigrants, apply these macro level interventions: *dissemination of information on immigrant issues, immigrant integration issues research organization and dissemination, dissemination of good social work practice experience*. Social workers, who work with immigrants, disseminate information about their problems: organize conferences to discuss issues with representatives of various institutions, participate in television and radio broadcasts in order to improve the social image of immigrants and to change public attitudes. Social workers, in order to solve the problems of integration, **conduct researches and carry out their dissemination**. In this way they seek to analyze the needs of immigrants and to deliver them to helping authorities and the public. Immigrants' integration projects are based on such studies. Social workers share the best practice experience in such ways: participate in seminars organized in Lithuania and abroad, cooperate with similar organizations in other countries, go to traineeship abroad. This helps to develop professional skills in working with immigrants, to spread their good practice and use the experience of other countries in the development of social services for immigrants. Similar mezzo and macro level interventions revealed the Potocki - Tripod (2002), Jae-Sung Choi, Soochan Choi (2005) Nash, Wong Trlin (2006) and Valtonen (2008), who state that social workers in the integration process of immigrants apply mezzo and macro level interventions: stimulate the social activity of immigrants, develop inter-institutional co-operation, bring changes in social policy, develop positive public attitudes through initiation and organization of social campaigns, organize recreational, cultural and educational events in order to develop the links between immigrants and the host society.

Conclusions

The results of research revealed that the integration process of immigrants faces these social problems: housing search, employment, legal, financial, lack of access to relevant information. The social worker's role in this process is extremely important, because social worker performs the function of a bridge between an immigrant and the various levels of public authorities. Social workers use social work interventions to ensure availability of social, educational, legal, health and other services, selecting appropriate and adequate resources and providing other social assistance.

The results of research revealed that social workers, solving the social problems of immigrants, evaluate the nature and level and only then apply the appropriate level of intervention. Social workers apply these micro level interventions: *information and consultancy of immigrants, mediation and emotional support*, which include individual social assistance. Social workers, solving the social problems of immigrants, apply these mezzo level interventions: *development of social network of immigrants, organization of socio-cultural events, organization and coordination of volunteer activities*. These interventions focus on the development of ethnic communities and the promotion of social interaction between different ethnic groups and the host society, and thus make it possible for immigrants to develop social relationships and multicultural competencies. In this context, social workers must be able to perform the role of manager. Social workers providing social assistance to immigrants' integration process, use the following macro level interventions: *dissemination of information on immigrant issues, conduction and dissemination of researches based on immigrant integration issues, dissemination of best practice of social workers*, which are focused on the initiation of social changes in the integration policy of immigrants, and in this context social workers play the role of a change agent.

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