

## The authority in social work practice: meaning and ethical dilemmas

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**Abstract.** The work seeks to reveal the importance of critical evaluation of authority of social workers. The definitions of authority encountered in philosophical, psychological and pedagogical literature are being discussed, the problem of authority in social work and its implications to social work practice with children are analysed. The article presents the theoretical explanations of the concept of authority and its ethical implications for social work practice. It discusses that authority of social workers working with children is closely related to parental and pedagogical authority. The article also presents the arguments, why it is important to explore and evaluate the authority of the profession of social workers.

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### Introduction

The authority is a complex and context bound concept and can be analysed through various perspectives. The pedagogical, psychological, philosophical literature and research provide diverse and rich interpretations about the phenomena. Barbierato [1] argues that the importance of authority has decreased in contemporary times and there is a crisis of authority. Nevertheless, Hugman [2] emphasizes the importance of professional ethics in social work, because the profession carries deontic authority and professionals exercise power in relation to service users, especially in their practice with children. In practical situations, a social worker offers not only practical assistance, but reveals his/her personality and shows, how to act or do things by an example, teaches a person certain standards, values and, therefore, the profession of a social worker has a strong moral dimension.

Thus, a social worker needs to possess certain qualities to be able to influence service users and inspire them to change. Tijuniene [3] argues that a young person cannot be free from authority and learn without it, because he/she needs constant support and adult guidance. Therefore, it can be argued that authority operates in the relationships of social workers and service users and its relevance to social work practice requires further exploration and evaluation.

The aim of the article is to present and analyse the main definitions of authority and its implications to social work practice. Methods used in this research were mainly observation and analysis of scientific literature and also meta-analysis of existing researches in the context of chosen phenomenon.

### 1. The Meanings of Authority

The Oxford dictionary [4] defines authority as "the power to give orders, make decisions, and influence others and confidence resulting from personal expertise." Roberson also presents the perspective of instructional communication researchers, who describe authority as "the effective use of power, in the form of influence and control" [5:23]. However, Bitinas [6] does not support the definition of authority linked to power and argues that authority is linked to setting an example for others. The researcher argues that people, who educate children, can be good examples for them only if they establish authority in the eyes of children and personal life of adults' matches with the requirements set to children.

According to Bochenski [7], the authority figure might have certain features or capacities, which support their authority, but the main feature of authority is a relationship. Two main categories of authority are presented - epistemic and deontic authority. The first depends on professional

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training, skills and knowledge gained by specific social work training and the skills, used in daily professional practice. The second category is linked to power where a particular person is supposed to make decisions and to give orders to others.

These two categories can be related to each other, but it does not mean that the same person has both - epistemic and deontic authority to other person. The philosopher argues that the most common form of abuse of deontic authority is demonstrated when a person tries to get epistemic authority by force. Deontic authority can be related to sanctions or rely on solidarity. Bochenski [7] argues that epistemic or deontic authority should be recognized and accepted only through experience of an individual or others and can be logical if faith in necessity to accept it is supported by facts, because every deontic authority takes away a part of freedom from the person who accepts and follows the authority of a certain figure.

Recognition is the essential feature of authority [3]. Tiju-niene argues that "authority is gained by people, who speak courageously and clearly, who can say their opinion first, who without doubt declare their views, solve problems" [3:145]. Therefore, the researcher connects the phenomena of authority with the leadership and moral qualities of a person who works with children. It is also argued that spiritual maturity is one of the most important elements for gaining authority and that a person with authority needs not only to be recognized but also to be trusted and is ready to represent moral ideals by setting the example of the way he/she lives and works to awaken the desire of children to follow him/her and listen to. Tiju-niene [3] argues that a young person is not free from authority and needs constant support of a person, who can see their personal opportunities, understand a young person, respect freedom of a young person and can help how to look for the values in their life.

Skarbaliene [8] also finds close links between the concepts of authority and leadership and supports the arguments on the premises of relationalism. According to the researcher, authority can be gained by power, laws and fines but also by respect, recognition, competences and such authority is stronger than the one gained just by power. Skarbaliene [8] also claims that obeying the authority should not be based on the fear of abuse but firstly, on respect and a given right to others who can make important decisions and judgements.

Roberson [5] emphasizes the complexity and ambiguity of the concept. Nevertheless, he argues that there is a certain consensus among researchers and it exists in the relationships between people. He argues that understanding of the concept might depend on particular situations and people; once authority is earned, it needs to be maintained through evidence that it is reasonable and that power and influence are used properly by social work professionals.

## 2. The Ethical Dilemmas of Authority in Social Work

The concept of authority is often used in diverse ways in social work and has various meanings. The concept 'authority' is often used to describe formal or legal authority of social workers and power attached to the role by law and regulations or moral authority related to a character and virtues of a professional according to Banks, [9]. Clark [10] also argues that professional role often encompasses instrumental and moral responsibilities and moral and instrumental relationships. The moral authority and values of a social worker are necessary to be able to ethically fulfil their formal duties and obligations and sensitively exercise power, which they hold over their service users. The researcher argues that social workers who want to become moral authority for service users need to be honest, trustworthy, reliable and dependable. It is also argued that responses to stress and crisis situations often originates from the character of the person rather than the contemplation of various regulations and codes of ethics [10]. Therefore, the researcher states that it is important to assess the character of people, who want to become social workers and not only their technical skills and that evaluation should be included into the of training of social work.

The discussion on the concept of authority revealed that authority can be linked to power and strong influence to others [5,3]. Therefore, it can have ethical implications and become ethical problem if authority of a person is not used properly. Hugman [2] emphasizes the importance of professional ethics in social work, because the profession carries deontic authority and professionals exercise power in relation to service users and especially in their practice with children. The researcher argues that this power should not always be linked with force but with influence or persuasion to do something. Millar [11] also supports the argument that power is a part of many functions that social workers fulfil and states that social workers are not free to exercise power, the way they decide to choose it, because their interventions are often guided by policies, procedures. Clark [10:75] argues that "social work involves modelling ways of life and counselling over morally problematic issues".

Therefore, value neutrality is not possible or desirable among professionals of social work and the role requires demonstrating a virtuous character of a professional. Banks [9] claims that social work is based on contradictory aims and values, which are linked to care and control functions, what might create tensions between a social worker and service users. Social workers might have legal authority over children and represent the policies of local authorities. The work of social workers might contain various functions - such as assessment, casework, group work, support services to children and families, cooperation with other professionals. The reasons of involving social workers might also be diverse - parents or children might need help, there could be child pro-

tection concerns, delinquency, the services can be provided by NGOs or a public sector. Social workers need to be skilled negotiators and be able to work in a partnership with children, parents and various organizations. They need to be ready to face moral and ethical dilemmas in their practice and make decisions, which might impact the welfare of children and their families. Therefore, moral authority of a social worker is an important factor in making positive influence to children and their environment, thus, enabling the social workers to use power sensitively and wisely.

## 2.1. Character expressions

Tijuniene [3] emphasizes the importance of strong moral character of practitioners working with children. The researcher states that righteousness, ability to communicate sincerely and naturally is important moral features of a person with authority. The researcher also emphasizes the importance of authority of an adult to educate children towards moral freedom, creativity and independent thinking, what sometimes might clash with the functions of control of social work. However, the researcher also argues that a young person cannot be free from authority and learn without them, because he/she needs support and guidance provided by an adult. Tijuniene [3] claims that nurturing the spiritual freedom of young people is the essential component to gain true authority. She also points out that a person with the authority should attract them by moral values, so that the children can freely accept the adults' power and influence.

According to Skarbalienė, "authority means influence of a person or an institution in various activities and public spheres and describes personal qualities, which make a strong impression to others and witnesses will and intelligence of the person and gain public trust" [8:143]. However, it is also argued that authority can be gained by power or fear but the researcher argues that moral authority, which is rooted in trust, competences is by far more important and long lasting.

Pace and Hemmings [12] support the argument that children nowadays do not accept automatically authority of an adult, because of their position in the society and professionals need to earn authority over them. Unfortunately, many social workers might not be aware, how to earn authority over children and how their authority might influence them. There is a lack of the conducted research studies about the authority of a social worker; however there are a significant number of research studies, which explore authority of teachers and parents. Therefore, it is possible to learn more about the phenomena of authority exploring these studies and apply some knowledge to social work practice.

## 2.2. Proposed examples

In practical situations, a social worker not only offers hands on assistance, but also shares a personality and shows, how

to act or do things by setting the an example, teaches certain standards, values and due to that, the profession of a social worker has a strong moral dimension. According to Clark [10], professionals need to live a virtuous life to merit their responsibilities and trust and they cannot be value-free in their work. A social worker, who works with children, has a role, which frequently overlaps with a role of an educator, because of their activities aimed to educate children and their significant amount of time spent directly with them [13]. However, social workers might also frequently be aware of a wider social environment of the child and can offer support and work with wider circles of children, their families, relatives, neighbours, school, other professionals etc. It is important for social workers to understand well, how parental authority operates, to be able to work effectively with children and their families. There is significant evidence of research suggesting that families are very significant for children and the ways, how parental authority operates might influence the interactions of children with other adults and peers [14-15, 12]. Even though, there is the lack of research studies conducted to explore how authority of a social worker is gained and influences children. There is a significant number of qualitative and quantitative research studies conducted to explore and analyse parental authority, which sometimes might operate in similar ways as authority of a social worker and might directly influence interactions between children and social workers. Social workers might perform various functions, when working with children and families, they might need to help parents to restore their authority for their children, educate them, how to gain it, if it is not possible to do that, might search for other authority figures for children. Therefore, they might need to negotiate and balance their personal and professional authority for children and parental authority working with children to ensure their wellbeing. Ideally, social workers and parents would work alongside and cooperate, however, in social work practice the challenges frequently arise when parental authority is rather weak or parental authority is misused and social workers need to intervene and use their professional and legal authority to ensure the safety of children.

"Both children and parents generally agree that parents have the legitimate authority to regulate moral and conventional issues as long as authority is contextually appropriate and parents do not demand unfair or immoral behaviour" [15:3]. Parents have legal authority over their children, which are determined by law if parental rights are not terminated or restricted. According to Kuhar, parental authority is frequently described as "the distribution of decision-making and power between parents and adolescents, parental legitimacy to set rules" [14:322]. In the family context the authority can be seen as parental power over children and legitimacy-obeying parental directions and rules. The researcher also draws attention to the lack of consensus about the definitions of parental authority in the developmental literature.

### 2.3. Formal vs informal authority

The findings of the research study of Pace and Hemmings [12] indicate that children might not respect formal authority of adults such as teachers because of permissive upbringing at home. Therefore, social workers might face similar challenges of asserting and exerting authority with children if permissive upbringing dominates at home. Although, authority of a social worker might also operate in similar ways as parental authority, but social workers have less legal power for decision making and less responsibilities for children than their parents. However, they are responsible for safety and well-being of children and might start the conversation and imply the psychological control to address the communicative ways of exerting and asserting authority with children. Also, social workers have legal authority and power, when working with children and their families and can intervene if they think there is a threat for a child and his/her wellbeing in the family is put at risk. That might have legal and moral consequences and might result in taking the child from the family or restriction of parental rights. Social workers frequently work with families experiencing difficulties or lacking parenting skills. Therefore, that might cause difficulties for children to accept other adults as authorities.

The research study of Kuhar [14] also indicates that obeying the parental authority decreases during early adolescence, because adolescents start questions, they look for the meaning, intentions and circumstances of various rules and demands. Rules need to become more dynamic when a child starts demanding more autonomy. For the adolescents the parental authority depends more on making parental demands reasonable, based on good and clear arguments, knowledge and experience, according to Yaffe [16]. Yaffe also argues that "professionals point the weakening parental authority in the western society as a main factor for increasing pathological phenomena among youths" [16:211]. Obeying the authority of a social worker might also decrease during early adolescence, because adolescents might start looking into the meaning, intentions and circumstances of various demands and interventions of social workers and demand more autonomy not only at home, but also communicating with social work professionals. Therefore, social workers need to learn how to make demands more reasonable and based on good and clear arguments, knowledge and experience. These findings are also significant, because they show that the perceptions of authority depend a lot on the age of children and that parental authority and authority of social workers might be challenged more frequently during adolescence. Therefore, it is important to have good knowledge about the development of children and young people and be flexible to be able to gain or maintain authority during different developmental stages of children. As it is argued by Tijuniene [3], children cannot be free from authority and learn without them, because they need support and guidance of an adult. It is the responsibility

of an adult to educate children towards moral freedom, creativity and independent thinking. It might become a challenge for social workers if parents of children do not cooperate and do not try to perform the functions of parenting. Therefore, social workers need to have strong moral values and to balance effectively their moral and legal authority, which they might have over their service users and address the conflicts and tensions of their daily practice.

Social workers might perform not only control or care functions in their practice, but might work as educators and lead various groups or work individually with children and teach them various social skills, habits, behaviour management techniques. Therefore, the research studies about the authority of teachers and other educators might be valuable sources to learn about authority in education and how to gain and use it in educating children in formal and non-formal ways.

Barbierato [1] speaks about the crisis of authority in post-modern age and decrease of its influence in education. However, the researcher also argues about the positivity and importance of authority to children corresponding to the nature of the person and identifies three main features of pedagogical authority such as: free recognition of a person, acknowledging that authority is something beyond own individual capacities and accepting responsibility, which goes with authority. Galkiene in her research study [17] about contemporary teachers has explored the image of modern teacher in pupils' perceptions and spoke about the authority of an educator. The study revealed that for the pupils to accept a teacher as an authority their academic prudence and knowledge of the subject was not the main point, the most important factors were their personal qualities such as "understanding pupils, optimism and good sense of humour, ability to help, righteousness, being modern and colourful personality" [17:89]. Tijuniene [3] argues that pedagogical authority consists of epistemic authority and universal education of educators. She claims that it is important for educators to use their knowledge in practice. It is argued that educators can also gain deontic authority, which they should use according to the ethical principles. The moral authority is emphasized as an important component for an educator and such qualities as righteousness, respect, pedagogical love, strong character are emphasized as being important for children. Children need to have people they can trust, learn from and follow, and people, who can help them to find meaning in life through the examples of their personality [3]. Educators serve as an ideal for children by setting example of their lifestyle, values and children can identify them with. Therefore, children can be influenced, provoked and changed by educators, who are accepted as becoming an authority for them. Tijuniene [3] also emphasizes the importance of communication culture of an educator, his/her warmth, sincerity, openness and respect for others as important components of building authority of the educator.

It is argued that it is important for educator to express his/her moral values and humanity during the pedagogical process with children.

## 2.4. Pedagogical authority

The research of Määttä and Uusiautti [18] also explores the role of pedagogical authority at school. It is argued that a good teacher needs to be authoritative to have respect of his/her student. Students need to have clear rules, which are justified and create safety for them, and meet their needs. It is argued that educator's behaviour should rely on acceptance and aspiration, should be helpful for students to grow as personalities, to earn trust of the student rather than demonstrate power. It is important that an educator genuinely care about children and their holistic needs, protection, support and development. The research demonstrates that the concept of authority can be understood diversely. An authoritarian educator can be seen as a person, who controls children's behaviour and attitudes and expects them to conform to his/her will. Therefore, education is directed by an educator's power, not by interaction. On the other hand, pedagogical love and authority can be seen as trust in the child's ability to learn and become active and self-determined [18]. Therefore, the findings of different research studies support the importance of moral character of an educator [17-18, 3].

Similar aspects of authority can be encountered in direct social work with children, because a social worker can be controlling and willing children to conform to their will or guided by genuine pedagogical love towards them and care about their holistic needs and their development as a person and accept responsibility, which goes together with their authority. There is a lack of research, what qualities are needed

to become a social worker with authority and how children perceive authority of a social worker, however, the assumption can be made that some of the qualities of authority identified by research exploring authority of teachers are universal and desirable in any direct work with children.

## Conclusions

The article revealed that the concept of authority is ambitious and might depend on various factors such as the experience, character and the values of practitioners. The authority of social workers can be related to power and influence over service users and the lack of awareness of it might increase the risks to practice unethically and abuse personal or professional authority at work. The risks increase, when social workers deal directly with children because it is a vulnerable group and children can be more submissive to authority and influence of adults.

There is a lack of research which explores what qualities are needed to become a social worker with authority and how children perceive authority of a social worker. Therefore, it is important to conduct research studies to understand and evaluate personal and professional authority of a social worker as these studies can become an important tool in decision making and having positive influence over service users.

The concept of authority of a social worker needs to be well understood and defined to enable social workers to measure and evaluate their own authority at work. It is important to explore authority of social workers at different practical contexts such as day care centres, residential care homes, at NGO's and public services because the practical context might make influence on how authority of a social worker operates and reflects the various challenges attached to them.

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