

The Role of Social Work in the Epoch of Intergenerational Solidarity in Society

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Pregledni rad
UDK: 364.4-053.9
doi: 10.3935/rsp.v21i2.1188
Priljeno: listopad 2013.

The increase in the proportion of older people heightened the awareness of the phenomena accompanying old age, aging and older people in social work. In the paper we want to draw attention to the importance of defining and understanding intergenerational solidarity from social work perspective. Care for older people is often presented simply as activities performed for the benefit of older people, but in fact it is a reflection of intergenerational cooperation and connection. The broad network of care for older people depends on intergenerational cooperation, since most assistance to the older generation is provided by the middle generation employed in the care sector, with the younger generation being included through various forms of volunteer work. From social work perspective we define intergenerational links on three levels: the micro level, implying intergenerational solidarity within the family and social networks, the meso level of a community, and the macro level of society as a whole. Social work operates on all these levels, exploiting its particular knowledge about intergenerational collaboration. It is possible to argue that social workers most frequently fulfil their mission through social care services, through which they co-create solutions with individuals, families and social groups, within a community and in relation to the state. The paper is focused on specific understanding of intergenerational solidarity in social work. Critical understanding of generations in society (presented in the first part of the paper) is an introduction to the following analytical review of intergenerational solidarity on the three levels of social work. The analytical approach is based on the definition of social work in Slovenia. Corroborated with current foreign literature on social work with older people the international perspective is incorporated. With presentation of older people as not simply passive users of help, but also co-creators of life during the late stages of their life courses, the paper presents understanding of older generation and their role in society from social work perspective. The growing aware-

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ness of the increase in the number of older people has placed solidarity and coexistence in modern societies increasingly topical issues. It is important to develop various forms of solidarity and through this help our civilization to survive.

Key words: older people, solidarity, social work, generations, forms of care.

INTRODUCTION

Phenomena such as longer life expectancy, medical advances, the decreasing percentage of economically active population and the growing percentage of people dependent on care are accompanied by changes in family life and intergenerational relations. Contemporary debates about old age therefore often veer in the direction of demographic changes. The rise in the number of older people across the world is a consequence of a shift from high to low birth and mortality rates, a demographic phenomenon specific to modern societies. The world population, especially its developed part, is intensively growing old. In the more developed regions of the world already today 22% of the population is aged 60 years and older, by 2050, the present share will increase to 33% (Vertot, 2010: 11). The aging population is also a serious European socio-political topic. According to Eurostat projections, the proportion of people older than 65 years will rise from 17% in 2008, reach 20% in 2020 and 27% in 2040 (Österle et al., 2011: 18). The median age of the population, will rise from 2008 to 2060 from 40.4 years to 47.9 years (MDDSZ, 2006.). Data for Slovenia indicate an increase in the number of older people from 16.5% in 2009 to 35% in 2060 (Vertot, 2010: 14). On the other hand, the share of younger people is seriously in decline – the 2002 census data for Slovenia show that the share of young people (between 0 and 14 years of age) was barely

higher than the share of older people 65 years of age and over and the situation is not expected to change essentially in the near future. Rusac et al. (2011: 68) stress that demographic forecasts for Croatia are similar to other European counties – the share of people older than 65 years will rise by 2030 to 25%. The share of younger people and that of older people was in 2004 already identical.

Although longer life expectancy is one of the greatest achievements of our civilization of which we should be proud (Lymbery, 2005; Wilson, 2001), this is not how we think of it. Instead, population aging is seen merely as an increase in the percentage of care-dependent older people and consequently as a growing financial burden for governments that renders the existing pension system unsustainable and incurs additional costs in health care and social care. Demographic changes, dubbed »demographic scare« by neo-liberal consensus (Phillipson, 2005), are perceived as a threat to the young generation and a problem affecting all spheres of contemporary society forcing countries across the world to seek adequate solutions. Only recent researchers on long-term care (Kane, Kane, 2005; Österle, 2011; Ngan, 2011; Stuart-Hamilton, 2011; Flaker et al., 2011; Leichsenring et al., 2013) understand demographic changes as an employment opportunity for young people and a chance to improve interpersonal relations and general welfare. Writing about the case of Spain, Diaz (2012: 172) clearly showed how the newly

established centres providing assistance to older people could be utilized to create new job positions for the young and middle-age generation, reduce the burden shouldered by the middle-age generation caring for older family members and enable them to increase their work output, and finally, how this could be utilized to streamline resources available for health and social care systems. In addition to economic advantages that could be derived from this situation, population aging should also be perceived as an opportunity to boost harmony and solidarity among various age groups. Rather than adopting a common viewpoint on the phenomenon and rather than discussing it as a positive process that holds the potential for harmonious living, we still problematize it, describe it as a threat to humankind, push it to the margins and largely ignore and neglect everything that is related to old age.

Longer life expectancy and related aging of the population has been turned into its main problem. Hazan (1994: 17) describes the manifestation of old age as social problem: »Within it old age is seen as posing a threat to everyday conceptions of space, time and meaning.« There is great necessity of care for older people, provided by the state and by various professional and people from informal networks. It is expected that the care is based on intergenerational contract, therefore special attention is devoted to intergenerational solidarity among countries in European Union (Svet EU, 2005; MDDSZ, 2006). Although it is an alarming recognition, it is precisely what is vital for our appreciation of the importance and role of older people in contemporary societies. The modern way of life that glorifies productivity, efficiency and the hunt for profit undermines the value of intergenerational links. The young, the middle-age and the older generation

only rarely intermix at workplace, for entertainment or through other forms of cooperation (MDDSZ, 2006). The development of sciences and resulting knowledge have displaced the experience and wisdom possessed by older people, indirectly aggravating their situation and reducing the value of old age (Hazan, 1994; Bengston et al., 2005; Achenbaum, 2005). Moreover, the mechanisms for intergenerational communication are still absent. Young people do not have many opportunities to establish communication with older people, and even when they do, intergenerational communication fails to get off the ground. Despite the advancement of science and technology, people continue to be social beings needing contacts and interaction with other people and keen to pass down knowledge and wisdom to younger generations (Mali, 2009: 245). It is therefore important to research and put into practice methods that will enable the co-existence of the generations and solidarity among them. The emphasis is on intergenerational solidarity and on acts aimed at finding and implementing approaches that lead to a substantial quality of our lives. Intergenerational collaboration is the basis of society's existence and development.

This paper looks into intergenerational solidarity through the lenses of social work. It explains a specific understanding of intergenerational solidarity within social work and the role of social work with older people. In the first part of the paper the definition of generations from social work perspective is based on critical understanding of present theory of generations. With understanding of generations in society the importance of intergenerational solidarity on the three levels of social work is stressed in the central part of the paper. Social work with older people is a discipline that has entered the area of assistance to older people

in an effort to respond to the need for intergenerational harmony. The solutions in social work offer the new ways and forms of co-existence that will not be based on any divisions, based on age or some other characteristic. Its conceptual basis, its continuing struggle against every kind of exclusion and effort to empower weaker members of society, make social work with older people a discipline that is well suited to research and find ways for the long-term survival of the community. Social work perceives generational harmony as a means of strengthening community in the way that its members will be able to control and manage their lives on their own, but will also be willing to join forces with others when they need to cope with the crisis and difficulties. It encourages the community to accept the differentness of people with less personal and social power, so that everyone may find worthwhile place in a community which wishes to join. The activities performed as part of social work with older people include assistance to individuals, families or communities (the micro level), the organization, coordination and creation of new forms of assistance (the meso level) and an active shaping of politics, systems and values (the macro level). Accordingly, this paper touches upon all the three levels (the macro, meso and micro level) on which generational harmony manifests itself, and presents the specific understanding of the concept of intergenerational solidarity within social work.

The analytical approach in the paper is based on the definition of social work in Slovenia. Corroborated with current foreign literature on social work with older people the international perspective is incorporated. With presentation of older people as not simply passive users of help, but also co-creators of life during the late stages of their life courses, the paper in

conclusions offers novel understanding of older generation and their role in society.

THE CONCEPT OF INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY

The growing awareness of the increase in older population puts the issues of solidarity and coexistence in modern societies high on the agenda for discussion. It is interesting that it was longer life expectancy that alerted us to the necessity of solidarity, although it is one of the crucial phenomena of our civilization. Regardless of the reasons that led us to recognize its significance, what is important at this stage is to develop various types of solidarity because it is vital for the survival of our civilization. The discussion on intergenerational solidarity is also closely connected with the understanding of intergenerational processes within a family (Kohli, 2005: 518). Family life is decisive for the development of solidarity, since it is a hub where individuals obtain personal experience of intergenerational relationships that enables them to practice and cultivate solidarity later in life (Ngan, 2011; Giarrusso et al., 2005). Unfortunately, changes in modern family life prevent them from obtaining such an experience. Lower birth rates, the rising divorce rate and single-parent families are only few among the many factors affecting modern family life (Mali, 2010). Intergenerational cooperation within families was in the past the basic way of ensuring mutual help and consequently the foundation of intergenerational solidarity (Hlebec et al., 2012: 5). Today, intergenerational solidarity has become part of the welfare state, since as Mandič (2009: 144) argues, a large portion of welfare state programs is aimed at re-directing financial resources from the economically active to the non-active pop-

ulation. The three crucial systems based on intergenerational solidarity are health care, long-term care and the pension system. Demographic changes, particularly the ever increasing life expectancy and the ever-decreasing birth rate and the resulting redistribution of resources, have shattered the sustainability of these systems, leading many countries in Europe and elsewhere to search for solutions that would enable them to preserve the existing systems. System reform has therefore been constantly reappearing in social policies over the past few decades, and as Puljiz (2008: 113-116) argues in the analysis of the pension system in Croatia and Italy (Puljiz, 1998), the reform process is nowhere close to an end.

The notion of intergenerational solidarity has been a recurring theme in social policies over the past decade. At first glance, it is a quite clear and understandable concept, but an attempt to analyze its meaning will reveal that it is contradictory in itself. When we consider intergenerational collaboration with a view to achieving intergenerational cohesion, we should first ask ourselves whether it is sensible at all to divide life into chronological segments, or chronological periods that set the boundaries between individual generations. The modern way of life and the associated longer period of physical fitness teaches us that youth has begun to overlap with what used to be considered middle age and that the boundary between middle age and old age has been similarly blurred (Kristančič, 2005; Gilleard, 2005). Individuals can now move between areas and simultaneously pursue education, work, and leisure experiences throughout life, rather than being restricted to one or the other in different stages of life (Bengston et al., 2005: 496).

This manner of thinking calls into question the division into generations as we have known it in the past as well as the related

understanding of intergenerational collaboration. German sociologist Karl Mannheim (Morgan, Kunkel, 1998: 11) made first serious attempt to define age groups. He defined generation as a category of people born within specific historical era or time period, assumed to share a consciousness because they were exposed to the same social, political, economic, and intellectual environment. Beranek, Pobežin (2002: 266) define generations in Slovenian dictionary of foreign words as groups of people of approximately the same age, who live during the same time period and have similar interests or views. Kohli (2005: 518) defined generations with regard to society or the family: »At the level of the family, generations refers to position in the lineage. At the societal level, it refers to the aggregate of persons born in a limited period (i. e. birth cohort according to demographic parlance) who therefore experience historical events at similar ages and move up through the life course in unison.« Prevalent definitions are rather flexible and they create room for debates on the changes affecting the hitherto dominant concept of generations. Below is our attempt to approach it in a way that enables the understanding of generations in social work.

Mannheim believed that generational consciousness arose not from merely being born at the same time but from being exposed to the some kinds of experiences in a common intellectual, social, and political environment (Morgan, Kunkel, 1998: 11). The concept of generations in sociological and gerontological literature is often connected to the concept of »age cohort«. Cohort implies the intersection of historical influence as indexed by birth year, and individual development or maturation (Bengston et al., 2005: 495). People of the same birth cohort share a social and cultural history which influence on their attitudes, be-

behaviour, and define their lifecourse. There was the central question of whether a »generation - often defined as a twenty-five-year birth cohort - could be said to hold monolithic attitudes, given the enormous diversity that exists within any population sub-groups« (Macnicol, 2006: 53). Critical dimension of the generational concept is in separation and segregation of society. With the segregation of society on generations, older people become »hermetically sealed off from the rest of society« argues Macnicol (2006). In contemporary societies it is precisely this dimension that can no longer define generations, since people's interests and views are explicitly individualistic and, thanks to contemporary technologies, more alike than in the past. People's viewpoints, be it political, professional, religious or other, are a personal matter, not a generational one. Moreover, it is precisely within this area that collaboration among people of different ages is most frequent and most palpable, so it is no longer a characteristic that draws boundaries between generations, but one that connects them.

Ramovš (2013: 9) argues the differentiation of society in three generations - the young (first generation), the middle (second generation composed of adult people) and the third generation (the generation of grandparents and pensioners). The division into the young, middle and older generation arises from the division of life into three life periods. During the first half of the 20th century, such a division was quite frequent and based on people's ability to work: youth was seen as a preparation for work through education, middle age as an active period of life and old age as a period of retirement and economical inactivity (White Riley et al. 1994, Kohli, 1986, Bengston et al., 2005). Since the end of the 20th century, the understanding that life exceeds the construct of life based on work activity

(production and wages) has been ever more pronounced. Although in the dominant understanding work is still closely associated with payment or wage (it is why we talk about paid work) (Flaker et al., 2008; Castel, 2003), people are increasingly aware of other dimensions of work that are not connected with payment. Other kind of work, also called shadow work, definitely deserves as much attention as salaried work in discussions about the division of lifecourses into several time periods. Earning money, making profit and proving one's productivity through work are in the general perception the ways of ensuring livelihood. Contemporary society is still predominantly a wage-earning society (Castel, 2003: 446). Survival of society does not depend solely on the resources needed to buy goods on the market (i.e. money), but also resources through which we establish and cultivate good interpersonal relationships, satisfy our needs for socialization, personal contacts and collaboration. The transformation of a wage-earning society could be possible with the re-establishment of intergenerational solidarity.

At the turn of the 21st century, people began to be aware of the fact that our lives are affected by many factors and that paid work is only one among these. Heinz (Bengston et al., 2005: 496) even talks about the deinstitutionalization or destandardization of life and lifecourses. The once-stable lifecourses based on the three periods of life that were related to work and productivity, and the resulting three generations (young, middle age and older), are the thing of the past. Although paid work still strongly defines individual periods of life, its influence is neither ultimate nor crucial. The economic, financial and social crisis of the past few years that shattered the stability of jobs and continuity of professional careers increased the vulnerabil-

ity of life courses (Cerami, 2011; Jordan, 2013; Hester, 2013). Individuals undertake responsibility and make decisions how to embed work and education in their lives, how to handle reproduction, set up a family and spend free time. The three life periods – youth, middle age and old age – which in the past determined the time for education, work, reproduction and leisure, today no longer correspond to the circumstances in which we live.

The division of people into generations promotes differences among individual age groups rather than advantages, opportunities and challenges around which people's lives revolve (Giarrusso et al., 2005; Attias-Donfut, Wolff, 2005; Bengston et al., 2005; Kohli, 2005). It is even possible to say that it creates the conditions that produce the generation gap, which in the circumstances of the aging of population all too frequently appears as an inevitable feature of contemporary society. Our time is one in which it is no longer important to which generation we belong nor what age we are. What is important is to explore and put into practice various forms of common life, existence and collaboration. Regardless of how we name it, intergenerational collaboration or something else, the emphasis must be on cohesion and on directing our efforts and behaviour towards seeking and achieving various forms of joint and meaningful quality life. The emphasizing of inequalities among people was a characteristic of the wage-earning society with prevailing negative individualism (Castel, 2003) that proved to be unsuitable. What is needed is the kind of society in which people will be able to choose their own lifestyles, maintain their cultures and cultivate their beliefs without having the power to destroy, humiliate or expel those who are different from them. Only in this way can we hope to move away from the culture of hatred and

exclusion and create the culture of acceptance or even one that will support differences, in which the preservation of human dignity will not depend on what we possess, to whom or what we belong, what roots or convictions we have, how old we are and to which generation we belong.

Intergenerational solidarity has been traditionally embedded in the models of social interconnectedness and relations among various age groups which involve two levels – one is that of community and the other that of family. Hlebec et al. (2012) give the overview of these models in Slovenia and abroad while pointing out that the interconnecting of the social (macro) and family (micro) level is not sufficient. What is equally important is intergenerational solidarity on the community (meso) level, which unfortunately receives less attention, both generally and in research studies (Kohli, 2005; Macnicol, 2006; Hlebec et al., 2012). Within social work, it is precisely the community that is seen as the main connective tissue between the micro and the macro levels and an essential element for the establishment and cultivation of solidarity. Flaker (2012: 38) even says that the concept of social work in itself calls for solidarity, since it sees and hears all those who have been relegated to the margins of life and denied a voice, for reasons rooted in tradition or modern ways of life. Solidarity is one of the most important components of social work. It understands and articulates the issues of solidarity here and now, in a comprehensible and familiar manner, enabling individuals to take their destinies into their own hands. It is precisely the principle of solidarity within social work that enables people to change their lives for the better and in the way that these changes are not guided by others who have power to direct other people's lives (Jordan, 2007). Social work enables changes

in the way that it empowers precisely those who have less power, people in crisis and uncertain situations, so that they can make essential changes and improvements.

SOCIAL WORK, SOLIDARITY AND GENERATIONS

Recently, professionals in various fields have devoted much attention to the increasing and continually changing needs of the older generation. Demographical changes have a significant interest for social work. Older people have moved from being a marginal concern in the mid-20th century, to one of central importance for social work in the 21st century (Payne, 2005, Lymbery, 2005, McDonald, 2010, Mali, 2013). It is increasingly important for social work to develop a specialization area that will be devoted to the issues of older people's lives and all aspects of assistance they need. The role of social work has changed in new social circumstances, with the focus steadily shifting to the work with the older population. As Nathanson & Tirrito (1998) say, social work is a dynamic discipline responding to social circumstances. Phillips (1996: 149) attributes to social work with older people have a very special role, arguing that the survival of social work depends precisely on this specialization area. The older generation therefore represents a real challenge for social work. At the same time, the nature of social work with older people is such that it pertains to all social workers regardless of their specialization area. We all grow old and therefore we are all the potential users of services provided by social workers. A social worker working with younger age groups may not be acutely aware of this, but this makes it no less important.

Mali (2013) argues that social work with older people is a specialized area

which requires generic knowledge not only about social work but also other disciplines concerned with the later stages of life. Social work is an interdisciplinary science that incorporates a number of theories. Me-sec (2007: 1-3) divides them as follows: (1) theories that explain social work by referring to its ethical rationale and necessity, or to its empirically verifiable positive social function, and (2) theories that explain how to conduct, or perform, social work. The former are closely related to philosophy and ethical issues, on the one hand, and to sociology as a science about the functioning of society, on the other. The latter, being concerned with the action aspect of social work, lean on theories within other sciences (psychology, sociology, the theory of education, organization etc.), on the one hand, and on theories derived from empirical research within social work itself and social workers' experience, on the other. McDonald (2010: 42-46) quotes Healy (2005) who lists medicine, economy, law, psychology and sociology among the disciplines useful in all areas of social work, including social work with older people. Which theoretical starting point will prevail depends on the personal choice of a social worker and the orientation of the organization for which social workers works. For example, a social worker working within health care will certainly give priority to medical science.

Social work with older people should be clearly conceptualized if social workers are to be efficient in performing practical work and resolving the crises experienced by older people (Ray et al., 2009). To achieve this, they need (1) knowledge and experience about the aging process, and (2) specific skills and knowledge needed to research the needs of older people and find ways to satisfy them. The conceptual over-atomization of social work could result in the failure to recognize social work

with older people as a specialization area. Social work enters the area of work with older people in a specific way, and it is not the only discipline dealing with people during the later stages of their lives (McDonald, 2010: 3). The old age is a complex phenomenon and the older population is an expressly diverse group. In searching solutions to the crisis experienced by older people, social workers should be able to make critical assessments of the positions taken by various disciplines and policies pertaining to care for older people (Ray, Phillips, 2002; Payne, 2005). Knowledge about the specific features of older people's lives is not sufficient in itself. The assistance provided by social workers cannot be reduced to one age group, or one generation only. Social work is always conducted to the benefit of all people, all age groups and all generations, since one of its basic ethical principles is not to exclude, restrict or neglect anyone. Social work with older people as a specialization area (Mali, 2013) indeed concentrates on older people, but in so doing it does not exclude cooperation and co-creation of solutions with other age groups who come in contact with older people. The focus of social work's approach is on intergenerational harmony and intergenerational cooperation, although these terms are not used in social work itself. The conceptual direction of social work includes an intergenerational aspect that is manifested at various levels of social work practice.

Social workers know how to identify possibilities and opportunities for the positive evaluation of old age and they take the establishment of intergenerational links as a challenge. They seek to find ways to create and strengthen solidarity among generations at the level of the individual and the family where resources for overcoming the shortcomings in the area of interpersonal solidarity can be found. The strengthen-

ing of intergenerational solidarity, which is one of the most important goals, can take place on several levels: on the micro level of the family and social networks, on the meso level of the community, and on the macro level of society as a whole (Mali, 2009). The macro level necessitates the linking of nation-wide measures with those implemented on the other two levels, and it also opens for the state an autonomous and legitimate space for adopting the kind of policy that would encourage intergenerational collaboration. Social work reaches into all the three areas, owing to its specific kind of knowledge and knowledge about intergenerational collaboration.

Mesec (2003: 269) says that social work is a discipline that resolves social issues by involving in the care-provision process various social areas and levels (micro, meso, and macro). Similarly Rapoša Tajnšek (2007: 10) argues that social work can be successful only if it takes into account, in addition to the micro level (the individual, the family and the group), the meso level of the social environment, which includes informal and formal resources and assistance networks in one's living environment and community, and the macro level, which provides the social and political context for the consideration of social issues. Social work cannot be performed on one level only. Apart from being interdisciplinary, it also connects several levels of living (Flaker, 2012), so it cannot be restricted to one dimension only, or reduced to one space only. Each change initiated by individual (with the help of social workers) is reflected on all other levels and in social work's relation to other professions and experts dealing with older people. One important principle in social work is the conviction that older people are not merely passive recipients of help, but they also co-shape and co-create the quality of life during the late stages of

their live courses (McDonald, 2010; Ray et al., 2009; Nathanson, Tirrito, 1998; Lymbery, 2005). Through such an approach, social workers point to potential new forms of coexistence of various age groups and dispel prejudices against older people according to which they are merely parasites feeding on social welfare or so called »selfish welfare generation« (Phillips, 2005; Macnicol, 2006). The greater awareness of the increasing numbers of older people places the issue of solidarity and harmony in modern societies high on the agenda for discussion. It is interesting that it was the increase in life expectancy that alerted us to the significance of solidarity, one of the crucial phenomena of humankind. Regardless of the reasons that led us to recognize its significance, what is important now is to develop various types of solidarity and in ensure the continuation of our civilization.

Below we present the specific understanding of solidarity, generations and intergenerational cooperation within social work on the three levels: micro, meso and the macro level.

The micro level of social work

On the micro level, social work is concerned with how to establish and strengthen solidarity between generations within the family, where resources needed to resolve deficient interpersonal solidarity on other levels are located. In this context, social work enters the micro level of intergenerational solidarity which Hlebec et al. (2012) cite as one of the models of understanding intergenerational solidarity, i.e. the model of intergenerational family solidarity. In this model, intergenerational solidarity is a multi-level and multi-dimensional concept composed of various aspects of relations among parents and children, including emotional ties, exchange of various servic-

es and activities, as well as conflicts, discords and ambivalences. Intergenerational solidarity, as an important form of social mainstay, manifests itself when an older family member becomes ill and the family needs to find ways to cope with the illness (Toseland et al., 2001). Although in such cases the main sources of support for the ill person are family members of the same generation, data show that members of other generations have become increasingly involved (Pahor, Domanjko, Hlebec, 2011: 75, 76), intergenerational ties represent 35% of the entire support network. Comparable data are also presented by Štambuk et al. (2012) who point out that the preservation and strengthening of family ties and the quality of interpersonal relations are particularly important for disabled people.

Social work with older people draws attention to the changes introduced into the dynamics of family life with the aging of a family member. In their perspective, old age and changes accompanying it are a challenge which a family needs to address rather than a problem. The manner in which the family will respond to the challenge depends on the living pattern of individual family and its reaction to changes which the old age inevitably brings about. Social workers help families to accept old age as a challenge in a specific way (Čačinović Vogrinčić, 2006). The mission of social workers working with older people is to improve older people's capabilities and capacities and consequently enable them to confront their difficulties and solve distress (Mali, 2008; McDonald, 2010; Lymbery, 2005; Phillips et al. 2006). In so doing, social workers adhere to certain principles of work, for example, seeking strengths, promoting maximum functioning, promoting a non-restrictive environment, promoting ethical practice, respecting cultural differences, working within a systemic perspec-

tive and setting appropriate goals (Burack-Weiss and Brennan, 1991). These principles point to the specific features of social work with older people which stem from a holistic approach to older people and their needs, with an emphasis being on the promotion of the users of social work as partners in the process of help provision and on their active role and cooperation with professionals, i.e. social workers, in finding solutions. Koskinen (1997) writes that social workers help older people by improving, through joint effort, older people's capacities and abilities to confront difficulties and solve problems. This brings social workers face to face with various issues of old age such as vulnerability, dementia, extreme old age, loneliness, family distress, strained intergenerational relationships, various ethnic backgrounds, older people with special needs, blindness in old age, alcoholism in old age, widowhood in old age, stress, suicidality among older people, violence, various sexual orientations, consequences of the Holocaust and other phenomena. What is always in the forefront of social work, is the strengthening of the social power of older people.

The perspective that places emphasis on individual power requires from social workers to approach older people in a novel manner that shifts attention from individual problems to the search for new possibilities and opportunities in one's life. Trauma, pain and difficulties may also carry the seed of hope and the potential for change or as Wallsh (2006) stressed there is the possibility for strengthening the family resilience. The perspective relying on individual power offers a simple formula: mobilize users' powers (talents, knowledge, capabilities and other resources) so that they can realize their visions and goals and therefore achieve a better quality of life in accordance with their own understanding

of quality (Mali, 2008). When mobilizing power, it is useful to consider how older people may contribute to the life of other generations. Their age, accumulated wisdom and experience constitute the source of their power and represent an important resource for the succeeding generations. The resources for intergenerational collaboration are located within ourselves. Unfortunately, the contemporary way of life prevents us from recognizing them. We need an external perspective, the view of a professional, for example, a social worker, to alert us to these resources and present them in such a way that they become obvious so that we may exploit them in order to improve the quality of our collaboration.

The meso level of social work

Our lives are necessarily connected with the community. On the meso level, social work with older people seeks to find ways in which intergenerational links may be strengthened, to establish how organizations within the community can contribute to it and how the community can be mobilized. Social workers help older people and their families to obtain assistance from various services available in their environment, and coordinate these services (Walker, 1996). Using their knowledge about the needs of older people, they contribute to the development and linking of various services (Mali, 2008: 65). The models of understanding intergenerational solidarity frequently overlook the community aspect, but for social work which originated in the community it is the most important one. The community is one of the key notions in social work, primarily because it has the potential to link people and inspire them to cooperate, develop the awareness of their interdependence. In the modern understanding of intergenerational soli-

darity, the community is most often mentioned in the context of policies and community services, primarily as an area for the development of various forms of care for older people (Hlebec et al., 2012). The dimension that is frequently overlooked is community education, which is one of the key elements connecting all age groups in the community. Another dimension that is neglected is informal and non-organized intergenerational solidarity (which is none the less important for that), such as neighbour relations that generate many contacts and many links among generations (Ngan, 2011).

Social work itself has quite neglected the development of community help that could strengthen the community and solidarity among people. In seeking to develop services that would ensure dignified life to the weaker members of communities, it took a rather partial approach providing many forms of support and assistance, but failing to encourage intergenerational solidarity at the same time. Over the past decade, social workers worked intensely on the development of services and programs targeted at older people needing help with their everyday tasks and activities. A broad network of services and programs of social protection for older people was established (Walker, 1996, Lymbery, 2005). The services are provided by the middle generation, while the younger generation is included through various forms of volunteer work. This kind of help and care for older people is so far the most powerful form of intergenerational collaboration and cohesion known to us (Mali, 2009). It provides an excellent basis for bridging the generation gap and can serve as a model of good practices on which intergenerational collaboration should be built.

Knowledge about the social construction of the later stages of life enables social

workers to identify various problems confronted by older people in contemporary society. Definitions of these problems are crucial for various programs and organizations for older people, enabling professionals working for these organizations to diagnose the problems and implement adequate measures to mitigate them (Hazan, 1994). The mission of social work with older people goes beyond this. Social work has not stopped at merely identifying and mitigating the problems, but has made one step further, seeking to help and support older people to make advantage of their rich life experience to overcome difficulties (Mali, 2008; Burack-Weiss, Brennan, 1991). It places emphasis on individuals and their capacities and capabilities rather than on problems whose solution is, at any rate, the responsibility of specialized programs and services to which social workers contribute through their knowledge about older people's needs (Mali, 2008: 65).

We analysed intergenerational solidarity on meso level of social work in Slovenia. There are three formal sectors providing help for older people: (1) the public sector with its centres for social work, homes for older people, centres for assistance at home, and providers of other public services and forms of living, for example, sheltered housing; (2) the private sector, and (3) NGOs and volunteer organizations working with, for example, the retired people's associations, self-help groups etc. (Mali, 2010: 1247). In such a constellation, intergenerational links develop between the old and the middle generation engaged in these kinds of services, with the job opportunity certainly being one of the basic factors motivating the middle generation. They are good example of new political economy of ageing needs (Cerami, 2011: 339) based on intra- and inter-generational solidarity that are able to provide coverage and protection

against old and new social risks. To a certain extent, links among the three generations are present within intergenerational self-help groups (Slokar, Brelih, 2010). In other words, intergenerational collaboration already exists within various networks of help, so the task that lies before us is to put this intergenerational collaboration into words, to recognize it and develop it further.

It is also important to identify the negative impacts of the existing forms of assistance to older people. The critical studies (Hazan, 1994; Milligan, 2009) are searching the negative elements of institutional protection that affect the quality of older people's lives. A transition from the home environment to an institutional one is extremely stressful (Mali, 2008, Štambuk, 2001). Social work should not overlook these findings, but should try to find solutions to eliminate difficulties. Štambuk (2001: 522) proposes courses that would prepare people for moving to home for older people, and the cultivation of good interpersonal relations during the period of adaptation to life in such an institution. Mali (2012a) adopts a more radical stance and proposes deinstitutionalization of care for older people. If the needs of older people in institutional care are to be satisfied, then the first step should be the downsizing of large institutions by encouraging the reorganization of large homes for older people into smaller residential units, or even the development of new forms of residence for older people. The deinstitutionalization of care for older people presents an opportunity to introduce changes that would address the needs of the present older population as well as the future one which, given the anticipated demographic changes, is likely to be even more numerous. Being a community-oriented process relying on communal resources and seeking to shape help that

responds to people's personal needs, the deinstitutionalization process also creates an opportunity to encourage and develop intergenerational solidarity. Similar solutions should be sought in Croatia as well, since as Žganec et al. (2008:186) argue, care for older people is underdeveloped on the local level, the network of institutional care is inadequate, and all of this is compounded by poverty and social exclusion of older people. The solutions will need to be sought on the community (meso) level as well, and not only the macro level, i.e. the socio-political construction of care for older people.

The macro level of social work

The macro level involves cohesion within society as a whole. It necessitates the linking of measures taken on the national level with activities undertaken on the other two levels, and at the same time it creates for the state an autonomous and legitimate space enabling it to adopt the kind of policy that will encourage intergenerational cohesion. The task of social workers is to contribute to the transformation of policies and resulting attitudes towards older people on the local and national levels (Koskinen, 1997; Mali, 2009; Mali, 2013).

The issue of intergenerational relations is so acute in Slovenia that the state accorded it priority status by entitling the strategic document adopted in 2006 »The Strategy of Care for the Elderly Till 2010. Solidarity, Good Intergenerational Relations and Quality Aging of the Population.« The Strategy is based on Commission of the European Communities Green Paper »Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations« (Svet EU, 2005). It is possible to say that social workers in Slovenia endeavour to support and sustain the existing forms of

care for older people in order to encourage intergenerational cooperation in the area of social protection. Within the field of institutional protection, which in Slovenia currently employs around 7,500 members of the middle generation, the state plans to enlarge the existing capacities by granting concessions and encouraging public-private partnership (Mali, 2010: 1248). The network of day care facilities is planned to be expanded to provide for an additional 0.3% of people over 65; similarly, expansion of the network for home assistance should cater for an additional 3% of people over 65, and sheltered housing for at least a further 0.5% of them. The expansion of services and forms of help for older people is at the same time an opportunity for the young and middle generations to establish contacts with the older generation. Viewed from this perspective, the aging of the population is by no means a problem, but rather an opportunity.

Special attention within this Strategy is devoted to the development of new forms of incentives for intergenerational collaboration, on the level of both informal and formal help for older people. On the level of informal help, the family needs to be trained and educated to be able to provide quality help for older family members. On the level of formal help, the state has proposed the establishment of »local intergenerational centres« that combine all public and civic capacities for quality aging and solidarity and good intergenerational relations in one location. The basic programs of the intergenerational centre are the following: various forms of training and help provided for the family with an older family member, day care, social home help, various forms of intergenerational volunteering, permanent awareness and training for local population programs in the field of care for quality aging and solidarity and

good intergenerational relations, a local home for older people as well as sheltered housing (MDDSZ, 2006: 21-22). In this part of the strategy, social work finds its place within both the formal and informal forms of help, which is evident from the description of the micro and meso levels of social work's operation. Various forms of voluntary work that bring the young and the middle generation in contact with the older generation already exist, and the Strategy particularly emphasizes further encouragement of the existing systems of organized intergenerational volunteering, as well as an expansion of the modern forms of intergenerational socializing.

The said measures on the national level call for synergy and complementarity of all protagonists, i.e., individuals of various generations, the family, civil society, the volunteer sector, the market and the state. »When designing and implementing the programs for solidarity and good relations between generations and for quality aging, successful interaction between these subjects has to be achieved. Regarding the programs in the domain of the state, efficient interaction between all sectors and services relevant to the individual case (health, social security, police, etc.) must be achieved« (MDDSZ, 2006: 21-22). The question that remains open is how to reduce the stigma attached to older people. It is strongly present in Slovenia, as confirmed by Eurobarometer data, showing that one in every four Slovenes believes that older people are a burden on society (Mali, 2010: 1249). The findings of this research are by no means encouraging in the sense of eliminating the gap between the generations, but they may be a stimulus and a challenge for us to begin to build bridges between the generations.

Social workers endeavour to eliminate the discriminatory attitude towards older

people (the English term frequently used to denote discrimination against older people is *ageism*) and empower older people to ensure their social, economic and political rights (Mali, 2008; McDonald, 2010; Nathanson, Tirrito, 1998). The practice of social work is aimed at eliminating prejudices against people, negative attitudes towards them and inappropriate approaches based on personal characteristics such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, age or the like. The anti-discrimination approach is also a basic condition for the accomplishment of intergenerational solidarity, since generations that see each other as exclusionary - a phenomenon frequently encountered today - cannot achieve harmonious life together. Unfortunately, the implementation of the Strategy in Slovenia is too slow. At the end of 2008, in the middle of the period covered by the Strategy, only one fourth of the goals were accomplished (Mali, Nagode, 2009). One of the reasons is probably the lack of an anti-discrimination approach to older people in Slovenia. And although the anti-discrimination principle lies at the basis of social work, it is not sensible to ascribe responsibility for intergenerational acceptance to one profession only.

Furthermore, social policy in Slovenia is not always in favour of intergenerational solidarity. With the new social legislation, comprising the Social Security Benefits Act (Ur. l. RS 61/2010) and the Exercise of Rights to Public Funds Act (Ur. l. RS 62/2010), which came into force in early 2012, the state strongly affected the quality of life of older people. A short survey on the early impacts of the new legislation (Mali, 2012b), which included interviews with social workers and older people, the users of social services, gave alarming findings. The vast numbers of older people relinquished their right to income support; the new social legislation deprived many old

people of the right to state pension, making them increasingly dependent on the income of their family members, and particularly their children. People were relinquishing *en masse* the rights to income support and state pension. Dremelj et al. (2013) write that around 16,100 people waived their right to income support (of these, 9,972 had turned to the Pension and Disability Insurance Institute by 31 December, 2011, and 6,100 to Centres for Social Work in 2012). Even before the new social legislation came into force, the Pension and Disability Insurance Institute received approximately 1,800 notices of the relinquishment of state pension (13 percent of those entitled). A comparison of the numbers of recipients of income support in December 2011 (46,752) and December 2012 (10,386) clearly shows that the number of recipients declined by slightly more than three quarters (Dremelj et. al., 2013: 61). The data clearly show that the new social legislation made older people, who had already been the poorest segment of society, even more vulnerable and that it pushed them under the threshold of poverty. Older people are forced to give up many things, even those that ensure the minimal quality of life. Moreover, the new legislation also affected social workers' practice, since it prevents them from performing the basic mission of work with older people, that is, the provision of help aimed at overcoming the crisis encountered by older people. Older people have consequently begun to lose confidence in social workers, because they perceive their help as ineffective.

The new social legislation places social work in a delicate situation. On the one hand, the situation in which older people have found themselves calls for social workers' assistance. As our quick assessment of the impacts of the new social legislation suggests, the crisis experienced by

older people is deepening. The main reasons are as follows: (1) the relinquishing of the right to income support diminishes older people's material and financial capacity for independent life; (2) the search for substitute sources of livelihood brings only short-term solutions and does not eliminate the crisis; (3) the forsaking of the basic needs of life, e.g. the need for food, clothing, heated apartments, contacts with other people, is on the increase; (4) the dismissal of older people from homes for older people poses an ever greater threat, with the likely consequence being their dependence on their relatives (Mali, 2012b). On the other hand, the lack of various forms of help to older people and the role of social workers in implementing the new social legislation create the image of social work as a profession that is rather ineffective in solving older people's crisis. People began to lose confidence in social work, while social workers themselves concluded that the requirements posed by the new legislation push them beyond the limit of acceptable ethical conduct. It would be unacceptable to allow this contradiction to become a feature defining social work, so it should be eliminated as soon as possible. In the given situation, social work should identify its own sources of power and mobilize its abilities and skills to find solutions to overcome the crisis experienced by older people with the introduction of the new legislation. In fact, it is even possible to say that the introduction of the new social legislation created an excellent opportunity to mobilize accumulated knowledge within social work and put it to good use, to ensure quality life during the late stages of people's life courses.

EPILOGUE

People engaged in social work with older people endeavour to create condi-

tions that can change the prevalent negative stance towards old age and aging. It is no longer possible to consider aging a special stage of life that is exceptionally and conspicuously negative, meaningless and unproductive. Aging is part of our life without which our youth and experience accumulated through our middle age would be incomplete and isolated. Obviously, the era in which we live demands that we stop for a moment and take time to reconstruct and redefine our understanding of old age. The transitions from one stage of life to another have recently become blurred. The lifestyles that in the past characterized a particular age group or generation are no longer circumscribed by age. The lives of modern people are cyclic rather than linear. Our life courses no longer follow a fixed succession of events. Events intertwine, emerge and take place in different chronological orders, unpredicted and unplanned. It is precisely the cyclic nature of our lives that enables intergenerational links, the passing on of experience and the achievement of intergenerational solidarity. The fact that our lives are cyclic (Bengston et al., 2005) does not obliterate specific characteristics of individual generations; these continue to exist and demand our attention. However, if we learn to consider intergenerational relations in a way that is different from the one that has been dominant so far, particularly taking into account the capabilities and capacities of older people, we will create conditions for the achievement of intergenerational solidarity needed for the future development of our society. Various examples of good practice indicate that such solidarity is possible, but to be able to implement it, all generations should master the kind of knowledge that is needed to develop appropriate conduct, provide adequate incentives and create opportunities.

Our consideration of the three levels of social work, the micro-, meso- and macro level, is intended to create an opportunity to discover potential solidarity among the three generations. Social work functions on all three levels, exploiting specific knowledge about intergenerational cooperation. It is possible to argue that social workers most frequently realize their mission through the services within the field of social protection, where they co-create solutions with individuals, families and social groups, within a community and in relation to the state. Social work cannot be restricted to one level only. Every change that an individual achieves with the help of a professional, or a social worker, is reflected on the other two levels as well as within relations with other professions and professionals dealing with older people. Social work endeavours to establish cooperation with these other areas, since joint effort is the only path leading to quality intergenerational links and benefits for older people.

The building of society that is based on intergenerational solidarity is within social work understood as an opportunity to create conditions for harmony among people different than those that prevailed in the past. Intergenerational solidarity represents an encouragement for social work to adhere to an approach that does not encourage the stratification of society into various age groups. Social work understands and respects differences among generations, but also seeks to find ways for the members of different generations to live in harmony, to cooperate, exchange various forms of help, support each other and practice solidarity. The promulgation of alarming demographic changes and of the population aging phenomenon marginalizes older people and reduces their social role. Older people who are pushed to the margins of society simply because they are old are

rendered powerless and compelled to hope for the assistance of the middle age generation. The middle age generation, on the other hand, is afraid of aging and old age. Today, no one wants to grow old. Is not the prolongation of life and achievement of the civilization to which we belong? How did it happen that instead of looking forward to old age, we are afraid of it, more than of the ozone hole and the warming of the planet? We are also afraid of older people. The phobia of old age should be overcome, and a good way to do this is a behaviour that encourages intergenerational solidarity. Intergenerational solidarity may increase the awareness that aging is a process undergone by every person and that without it our lives would be pointless, and above all incomplete and impoverished. In the current circumstances, social work could show the ways to encourage and strengthen intergenerational solidarity.

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Sažetak

ULOGA SOCIJALNOG RADA U EPOHI MEĐUGENERACIJSKE SOLIDARNOSTI U DRUŠTVU

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Povećanje udjela starijih osoba povećalo je svijest o događajima koji prate stariju dob, starenje i starije osobe u socijalnom radu. Ovim radom želimo skrenuti pozornost na važnost definiranja i razumijevanja međugeneracijske solidarnosti iz perspektive socijalnog rada. Skrb za starije osobe često se pojednostavljeno predočava kao aktivnosti u korist starijih osoba, no zapravo je ona odraz međugeneracijske solidarnosti i povezanosti. Razgranata mreža skrbi za starije osobe ovisi o međugeneracijskoj solidarnosti, jer veći dio skrbi za stariju generaciju pruža srednja generacija zaposlena u sektoru skrbi, a mlađa generacija uključena je putem različitih oblika volonterskog rada. Iz perspektive socijalnog rada definiramo međugeneracijske veze na tri razine: mikro razina, koja uključuje međugeneracijsku solidarnost unutar obiteljskih i društvenih mreža, mezo razina zajednice i makro razina društva u cjelini. Socijalni rad funkcionira na svim tim razinama, koristeći specifično znanje o međugeneracijskoj suradnji. Moguće je tvrditi da socijalni radnici najčešće ispunjavaju svoju ulogu putem usluga socijalne skrbi, unutar kojih sudjeluju u iznalaženju rješenja s pojedincima, obiteljima i društvenim grupama, unutar zajednice i u odnosu na državu. Ovaj je rad usredotočen na specifično razumijevanje međugeneracijske solidarnosti u socijalnom radu. Kritično razumijevanje generacija u društvu (koje je predočeno u prvom dijelu rada) uvod je u analitički prikaz međugeneracijske solidarnosti na tri razine socijalnog rada. Analitički pristup utemeljen je na definiciji socijalnog rada u Sloveniji. Međunarodna perspektiva je uključena na temelju novije strane literature o socijalnom radu sa starijim osobama. Prikazujući starije osobe ne samo kao pasivne korisnike pomoći, nego kao sudionike u stvaranju života u starijoj životnoj dobi, rad doprinosi razumijevanju starije generacije i njihove uloge u društvu iz perspektive socijalnog rada. Rastuće razumijevanje povećanja broja starijih osoba učinilo je solidarnost i suživot u modernim društvima aktualnim pitanjima. Važno je razvijati različite oblike solidarnosti, te tako pomoći da naša civilizacija opstane.

Ključne riječi: generacije, oblici skrbi, socijalni rad, solidarnost, starije osobe.