

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OR COUNSELING?

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Community development or counseling? *Finding the answer will help us to re-think better strategies for the actual crises in East Europe and in Romania, as a part of it.*

Social work is more often regarded as an answer to so many social issues that confront people with a sad reality: life is more than a scene for private practice! We were (and we are) bombarded with western social work literature, we did benefit of some western models of social work, we created institutions on these models but we did not resolve the dilemma: are we going to develop a counseling, psychotherapy-based social work?

During a discussion with a good friend of mine about social work in the East European countries we came across the mission of social work, beyond what it is and what it does in Western countries.

Taking a closer look to the reality as it is, I knew that somehow I failed! After studying in America, I got the illusion that counseling might be an answer, or at least a first step toward a better system for women that suffer violence beyond the closed doors of their families. But it won't work. It cannot work. We are facing an economic breakdown. We structure and restructure or de-structure old hierarchies hoping that we would get somewhere, but we don't. Families are faced with poverty, new values, almost imposed on to them, very aggressive generations of children and a great deal of hopelessness. Psychotherapeutic means, thought as initial face-to-face contacts, and mainly focused on individuals would alleviate some of the pain without tackling the causes. We do live in a systemic chaos! Private practice is not an option and counseling is only another cane offered to individuals as they try to make sense out of the non-sense of their lives!

Let's analyze further into this argument. Talking about battered women, what services are available for them in our country? First, as I said before, the legal system does not criminalize domestic violence yet. This is too much of a private issue to be addressed. Due to this major lack in terms of institutional response to spouse abuse, through counseling or psychotherapy we could only share our frustration, as social workers, with the women – to the extent of the lack of clear legislation on the issue. Is this empowerment? Maybe, if our goal is to empower them to accept that there is no legal response to their problem. Sure enough, it does not sound like empowerment to me! By developing community services that would promote and monitor the legal response, we would be able to empower women and to advocate for them, dealing not only with symptoms but also with preventive strategies for any further violence of the kind. Second, I have to remind that there is no special counseling unit for battered women. And no immediate need for it. What a woman needs in an emergency is a safe place to go, a proper institutional

response and a proper community response as well. Working with mentalities is the hardest part of any community development program, this being the first steps to be taken in this regard. By bringing together major forces in the community (the church, the school, the police, the hospital, the media) we can change mentalities and create room for future innovative solutions. Social workers, in our social and political context, should be trained as educators, community developers, advocates, brokers, policy makers and only after all these, counselors. Life is too serious now, to be solved in counseling sessions. We need more of a macrosystemic approach, that would help us to address the causes first and foremost.

During my practical field placement, at Tulane School of Social Work, I was trained to be an advocate, a broker, a manager, a policy maker and a counselor for battered women. Since I am back in my country, I tended to think that the most economical approach of this problem, in our cultural reality, would be counseling, at a micro or a mezzo social level. I came to understand that this is not the case. We cannot help the trees if we forget the forest. Our entire social system is sick. How, then, can the individuals be safe? Academics provide us with so many theories about how to think a social problem, or how to name it (in a desperate Rumpelstischin-ish manner). We need skills and creative minds, to bring all these theories to life. Re-creating the system by building it around community based services would allow us smaller samples of reality out of a wide area to work with. After we will get "western" enough, we might try the counseling version. Not now, though. Or it will sound like a near death experience: we will see the Light only from the distance of our counseling couches, but never really reach it.

My friend woke me up from a lethal illusion. Without knowing it, he just had the best counseling session ever. And the client walked away with a new sense of life.