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## Original research article

# The concept of control from the perspective of social work clients

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## ABSTRACT

Social work can be seen as an ambivalent profession, the mission of which is to provide people with assistance as well as exercise a degree of control over them. Although dealing with the area of control in terms of human rights violations entails some risks, the field appears to be less conceptualized in the literature than the provision of aid. The present article attempts to address this deficit from the point of view of social work clients, with its aim being to present a hypothesis concerning what conceptions of control can be found within clients as well as to define the key aspects of these individual concepts. A qualitative content analysis of foreign and Czech professional sources was undertaken to achieve the goal.

Three concepts regarding clients' perception of control have been found, all of which have been found to have an inclusive logical relationship to each other. The article presents a hypothesis of three different levels of control perception – from the broadest concept of control (such as unsolicited or even unwanted social worker behaviours), through a narrower concept of control (such as a limited freedom of choice), and finally towards a specific concept of control as the mandated use of a service.

If the given hypothesis is confirmed in the research, it might also be useful to consider the relationships among the different levels of control in terms of their exclusivity (i.e. whether clients fall into one or more categories) or the variability among levels which depend on diverse factors. This implies the question of what variables are involved and how they correlate with the individual levels of perceived control. Given that the present thesis was created in the field of social work as a practical profession, the question emerges as to the application level of the presented findings, an aspect which is dealt with briefly in the paper's conclusion.

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## Introduction

Social work is a profession that aims to mediate problematic interactions between people in adverse social situations within their social environment. On the one hand, it is understood to contribute to overall social altruism [1] and the promotion of social justice and individual human rights [2], on the other it works towards the good of society as a whole [3] or to control individuals in order to protect the rights of themselves or others. Thus, it logically becomes an ambivalent profession, involving aspects of both assistance and control, which is an ambiguity described by Trotter and Ward [4] for example. Úlehla [5] clarifies the commitment of social work to both the norms of society as well as to the disadvantaged. Van der Laan [6] describes this ideal mediator role as one that social workers should embrace, affirming that true human emancipation is only possible within the standards of a society. Banks [1] has written on this duality within social work, by which relationships and boundaries of assistance are limited by the values and standards of a given country; Clark [7] also stresses that social work must be understood in the context of its relationship to the state and its purpose.

While theories of assistance have been delved into in a large number of publications in the Czech context of social work, issues of control remain rather neglected. Van der Laan [6] and Úlehla [5] have published on these issues, and information can also be found in documents elaborating on the procedures in the Quality Standards of Social Services. All of these publications deal with the question of when and how it is legitimate to act against the client's intentions, but the works do not conceptualize the notion of control itself. In Czech-language publications, no definition of control functions (what purposes are served) are delineated, nor a definition of control from the perspective of the various participants: clients, social workers and the state. The first of these is focused upon in this text. Relevant questions may be directed, for example, regarding clients' reactions to control, the perception of the non-legitimacy of control, as well as to strategies chosen by clients when they become subject to control. Our article focuses on clients' perception of control in terms of the specific activities that characterize control. One means towards this goal was to determine through direct research how clients perceive control. The second option chosen for this article was first to survey how Czech and international literature sources understand and describe control activities from the perspective of the client. Thus, the ultimate aim of the presented paper is to hypothesize the concept of control in terms of its activities from the perspective of the clients of social work and to identify key aspects of individual concepts.

It first becomes necessary to define how the terms "control" and "client" will be used in the present paper. Control is broadly demarcated as "supervision, examination, management, influence" [8]. Social work functions according to the aforementioned commitment to society, thus control can be defined as a range of instruments influencing and regulating the behaviour of people; these instruments of legitimate power are used by social workers to maintain in society order and normality (in the sociological sense). Given

that such a concept of control is very broad and can be related to a client's perspective in terms of either consent or disagreement with such regulations, and these attitudes exert their own influence, the subject matter of the following text will be narrowed down to unsolicited control acts.

On what can be called the more direct side of an imaginary scale, control is usually defined in relation to the causes for its application, or in relation to the consequences a method of control seeks to prevent. In the first case, the legitimate measure entails two main reasons: firstly, because of a client's lack of competence and, secondly, because of social irresponsibility on the client's part [9]. From a critical perspective of social work, structural factors would probably be added as a third cause. In this case, control is applied to prevent specific risks, thus it can be exercised (1) in the interest of a person who is or might be threatened by another's behaviour, (2) because a person threatens or might be a threat to themselves, or (3) is exercised over a person who threatens or might threaten other specific individuals or society as a whole [10].

Control in social work can take many different forms and thus should be viewed as a range of various negotiations that social workers have available. On the one hand, activities are carried out that can be referred to as "direct control" [11], and open pressure can be placed on the client to make the client take or refrain from some action (for example, "supervision" in the area of probation and mediation services). On the other end of this scale, rather indirect forms of control can be employed that are based on the control of language and communication methods by one party involved in an interaction (e.g. the social worker) with the goal of enticing or coercing the other party (e.g. the client) to consider and discuss her or his own behaviours in terms of the perspective of the first party [11]. As an example, standards and parameters that social workers in child protective services have established and follow can be used to define what "normal" child care should entail.

In this introduction, we should also consider whether the term "client" can even be used in the context of control. A number of authors reject this concept, since they perceive a client as being in an equivalent relationship based on respect for the client's concerns [12–14]. For example, Berg [12] uses the term "visitor" for involuntary clients, reserving "client" only for those who solicited an action or service, i.e. who wish to negotiate with a social worker to meet a specified engagement contract. Behroozi [13] reserves the word "client" for people who have a freely solicited contract with a social worker, i.e. with the mutual consent of both parties, as does Hill [14], who understands this term in connection with therapeutic approaches. In the context of control, Hill favours the English expression "the people involved" (which in Czech can be translated as "zapojení lidé"), or "the people concerned" ("lidé dotčení").

Should social work forego the use of the word client and use one of the terms of the above-mentioned authors? Perhaps it would be enough if social work frees itself from its purely therapeutic roots and emancipates itself enough to promote its own definition of the client. These parties should perhaps no longer be seen as those seeking help unilaterally, but in terms of their ambivalence as well, for example, merely as those who are the focus of social worker activities [9], or less generally, as those "who have become the subject of the control and oversight activities of social workers, or an object

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