

# Competencies of Experts in Assisting Professions for Psychosocial Work

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of research into the competencies of experts in assisting professions for psychosocial work. The research was carried out in the centers for social work, as the basic institutions in the social protection system of Republic of Srpska. The sample consisted of 100 respondents in assisting professions (psychologists, educators and social workers). The questionnaire investigated their communication, mediation, teamwork and empathy skills, as well as the relationship between competency levels and educational attainment, age and length of service. The results showed that professionals in the assisting professions have a high level of competence for psychosocial work. Lower levels of competence are experienced by older professionals and longer working lives, while their professional competences are not affected by the level of education. Supervision is recognized as an effective way to prevent professional burnout, but also to develop personal and professional competencies. In addition, further training in communication and mediation skills is recommended.

**Keywords:** competences, psychosocial work, psychology, pedagogy, social work.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Bosnia and Herzegovina are one of the poorest countries in Europe, with a 50% general social exclusion index based on indicators reflecting living standards, health, education, participation in society and access to services. This means that every second resident of this country is socially excluded in at least one of these areas. The index of long-term social exclusion is 47%, which refers to the percentage of the population with limited choices to improve their situation over the longer term [1]. With the introduction of the concept of social exclusion, attention was shifted from material to sociopsychological aspects of people's lives. This increases the importance of assisting professions, such as the profession of psychologist, pedagogue or social worker. They take on a key role in aiding and support to people who find themselves in a state of psychosocial need. Their competencies are based on the general characteristics of effective counselors: to have their identity, to respect and value themselves, to be ready for change, to have a sense of humor, to live mostly in the present, to appreciate the influence of culture, to be genuinely interested in the well-being of other people, that they can maintain healthy boundaries (do not bring their own difficulties in the relationship with the user), that they are deep in their business and see the meaning in it [2]. Psychosocial work requires a practitioner who is willing to reject stereotypical roles and be real with the user.

The social protection system is an area in which psychosocial work professionals provide services essential for the empowerment of socially excluded people, families and groups. Responsibility in the field of social protection in Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two entities (Republic of Srpska and Federation of BiH), Brcko District and 10 cantons. Since Republic of Srpska has full responsibility for the functioning of the social protection system in its area, this paper examines the competencies of professionals in the assisting professions (psychologists, pedagogues and social workers) in social work centers, as the basic institutions in the social protection system. The method of examining 100 experts in assisting professions from the centers for social work, their competences are investigated for psychosocial work (communication skills, mediation skills, teamwork skills and empathy), as well as the correlation of the level of competences with the level of education, age and length of service of professional workers. The aim is to identify the missing competencies and ways to improve them.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

### 2.1 *The concept of competence and psychosocial work*

Although the terms “competent” and “competence” are often identified in the literature, there is a difference between the two. Competent or expertise is a narrower term than competence and refers to the knowledge and skills required to perform work activities according to established standards, while competence is a broader term that indicates what and how people work to reach their goal in the context of the demands of their work [3].

Competencies should be distinguished from the ability and personality traits. One's abilities and traits are individual predispositions that can serve as a basis for acquiring knowledge, skills and competences; knowledge and skills are generally acquired through the education process; competences are acquired by learning in a real work situation, that is, by performing a specific job. This hierarchy is, in fact, an architectural model of competence, taking the form of a Greek temple, in which the abilities, personality traits and other characteristics of the individual form the foundation of the temple, while from them the knowledge, skills and attitudes rise, that bear the roof, composed of general and specific competencies. that is, competence and sub-competence [3].

In short, competencies are “sets of behaviours that are instrumental in the delivery of desired results or outcomes [4]. This means that competences refer to an individual's ability to perform certain tasks adequately and effectively in accordance with the expectations we have of him / her as an expert qualified in a field [5].

The competencies of psycho-social work professionals in assisting professions include the possession of specific skills, including communication skills, mediation skills, teamwork skills and empathy.

Communication skills are the skills of expressing thoughts and feelings in a socially acceptable way, that is, leading the conversation in a way that reflects the self-esteem and appreciation of the interviewee. The practitioner should communicate in an assertive manner with tailored non-verbal communication.

Empathy reflects the ability to empathize with another person without disrupting one's own emotional stability. Empathy with the other person, understanding and appreciating their thoughts, experiences and circumstances allows the relationship of trust, motivation and support to open when presenting emotional states. The importance of empathy for psychosocial work is evidenced by the following quote: “The authors' starting position is that emotions, compassion, care and virtues are very important in interventions and that these factors can improve the professional practice of psychologists, health professionals and social workers. We highlight the importance of the relationship between users and professionals in the practices of caring professions” [6].

Teamwork skills imply the ability of cooperation, to work together, to respect each other and to be tolerant, to be rich in the exchange of professional experience, to complement each other, while respecting the diversity of the profession, attitudes and working methods. Teamwork enables complex issues of social protection needs of individuals, families, groups and communities to be viewed, monitored and addressed from multiple points of view - social, economic, health, educational, psychological, legal, etc. Teamwork can be monodisciplinary (experts of the same profession), multidisciplinary (experts of different profiles) and combined.

Mediation, as a third-party neutral mediation process, makes it easier for conflicting parties to find mutually acceptable solutions. By taking on the role of mediator, professionals in the assisting professions can mediate conflict resolution in family relationships, marital disputes, community conflicts, and juvenile delinquency. As impartial mediators of conflict, professionals must have the skills to actively listen, ask questions, and analyze conflict.

This paper explores the competence of psychologists, pedagogues, and social workers for psychosocial work in centers for social work in Republic of Srpska. According to the international definition, “social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes social changes and development, social cohesion, as well as the empowerment and liberation of people” [7]. It is observed that one of the tasks of social workers is the empowerment and liberation of people, which is achieved through psychosocial work, which involves focusing on real life situations, so that the user relies on significant persons from their environment (family, neighbors and others). It is a work in which the user has the responsibility, with the help and support of a professional, to change his or her living situation. Professionals work with the user, not for the user.

The goal of psychosocial work is twofold: adjusting the user to the social situation, but also change of the social situation. In both cases, the growth and development of users is important. "Starting with such a definition of psychosocial work, psychotherapy is considered as an integral part of it, as well as a number of other preventive and treatment interventions. At the same time, psychosocial work is considered an integral part of social work, which, in addition to the goals of psychosocial work, also has the task of fostering social change and developing social services and services" [8].

For the purpose of understanding as fully as possible, it should be said that psychosocial work is understood in a narrower and broader sense. More broadly, psychosocial work is the basis, essence of different forms of professional work, if the term "psychosocial" implies human experience created in the relationship between the psychological characteristics of an individual and his social environment, and in the narrow sense, psychosocial work is a kind of model actions of practitioners, dealing with what conditions people live in, what difficulties they encounter, how they experience and survive, how they behave, how they overcome them and how to help them overcome using individual and social environment resources [9]. It is simply about using psychology knowledge and learning about the psychic factors of human behavior and interpersonal relationships.

## **2.2 Socio-political context**

Bosnia and Herzegovina are a complex socio-political community where responsibility in the field of social protection is divided into several levels: two entities (Republic of Srpska and the Federation of BiH), Brcko District and 10 cantons. The Republic of Srpska has full responsibility for the functioning of the social protection system in its area and aids citizens who are incapable of work and lack the means for living. The bearers of social protection are the Republic and the cities and municipalities respectively, which take care of meeting the needs in social protection [10]. In the field of social protection, more than 50 laws and by-laws are applied, which indicates the complexity of this system.

Beneficiaries of social protection rights are persons in social need and are divided into two groups: children (without parental care, with developmental disabilities, whose development is impeded by family circumstances, victims of violence, victims of child trafficking, with socially unacceptable behavior, exposed to socially risky behaviors requiring social protection due to special circumstances) and adults (financially unsafe and incapacitated persons with disabilities, elderly without family care, with socially negative behavior, victims of psychoactive substance abuse, victims of domestic violence, victims of trafficking in human beings and who, due to special circumstances, require social protection) [11].

Professional workers can intervene with cash benefits, provision of social services and other measures that meet social needs, prevent and resolve social problems. It is particularly important the right to counseling that can be exercised by those who need the systematic and programmed support and assistance of professional workers, who, by means of social work and other social and humanistic sciences, overcome the psychosocial problems encountered by the user, such as illness, old age, disability, unemployment, death of loved ones, problems in the upbringing of children and in the relations of parents and children, problems of risky behavior of children and youth, problems of marital and extra-marital relations, domestic violence, involvement of users in daily life after long stay in institutions, etc. [11].

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

The subject of research in this paper is the competence for psychosocial work of experts of three assisting professions (social worker, psychologist and pedagogue) in the centers for social work in Republic of Srpska.

The sample consists of 100 respondents of assisting professions from centers for social work operating in municipalities with different levels of development, which were determined by the Decision on the level of development of local self-government units in Republic of Srpska [12]. Table 1 shows the sample structure.

The research used a scaler test method designed to test the competencies of practitioners to perform psychosocial work. Respondents were offered statements related to the possession of psychosocial work skills ("I have communication skills", "I have mediation skills", "I have teamwork skills" and "I am capable of empathy"), which they evaluated as follows: 1 - I agree, 2 - I can't evaluate, 3 - I disagree. The first part of the scaler collects general data on the respondents: municipality and institution (center for social work) in which they work, profession, level of education, age and length of service.

**Table 1:** Respondent structure

Ordinal number	Criterion	Classification of respondents	Number and percentage of respondents		
			No	%	Total
1.	Development of local self-government units	Extremely underdeveloped	2	2,0%	100
		Underdeveloped	10	10,0%	
		Medium developed	25	25,0%	
		Developed	63	63,0%	
2.	Gender	Male	17	17,0%	100
		female	83	83,0%	
3.	Age	Up to 30	18	18,0%	100
		From 31 to 40	38	38,0%	
		From 41 to 50	8	8,0%	
		from 51 to 60	31	31,0%	
		61 and more	5	5,0%	
4.	Level of education	Higher education	20	20,0%	100
		Fakulty	67	67,0%	
		Master	13	13,0%	
5.	Profession	Social worker	80	80,0%	100
		Psychologist	11	11,0%	
		Pedadgogue	9	9,0%	
6.	Work experience	from 1 to 5	31	31,0%	100
		from 6 to 10	25	25,0%	
		from 11 to 20	17	17,0%	
		from 21 to 30	15	15,0%	
		31 and more	12	12,0%	

Data were processed in SPSS 20 (Statistical Pasckage for the Social Sciences), using the following statistical procedures: frequency (f) and percent (%) calculations; calculation of arithmetic mean (M) and standard deviation (SD); analysis of variance (F-test); Pearson's correlation coefficient calculation (r); calculation of the Kronbach-alpha reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ).

The hypothetical framework consists of one general and four specific hypotheses  
 General hypothesis: Experts in assisting professions have adequate competencies to perform psychosocial work, which depend on their age, level of education and length of service.

The first Special Hypothesis: Professionals in the assisting professions have adequate communication skills, mediation skills in conflict resolution, teamwork skills and empathy.

The second Special Hypothesis: Professionals of assisting young professions have higher levels of competence for psychosocial work.

The third Special Hypothesis: Professionals in the assisting professions, who have a higher level of education, possess a higher level of competence for psychosocial work.

The fourth Special Hypothesis: Professionals of assisting professions with shorter work experience have higher levels of competence for psychosocial work.

#### 4 RESULTS

Within the first specific hypothesis, it was tested whether the professionals in the assisting professions had adequate competences for psychosocial work (communication skills, mediation skills, teamwork skills and empathy).

The results showed that in the assisting professions, empathy is the most common skill (79% agree to possess this skill), then teamwork skills (77% agree), communication skills (71% agree) and mediation skills (64% agree).

Several practitioners expressed hesitancy regarding communication skills (11%), mediation skills (21%), teamwork skills (10%) and empathy (6%). Thus, a certain number of professionals do not have the ability to self-assess their own competencies. Since self-knowledge of one's own competences is a prerequisite for successful psychosocial work, the quality of their professional work is questioned in a smaller number of respondents.

In contrast, some are aware that it is necessary to improve their competences. This is indicated by the data that 18% of respondents believe that they do not possess communication skills, 15% of respondents do not agree that they have mediation and empathy skills, and 12% say that they do not have teamwork skills.

The results related to testing the first special hypothesis confirmed that the professional workers in the assisting professions have adequate competencies for psychosocial work, as most of them agree that they possess empathy, teamwork, communication and mediation skills.

In order to investigate whether the years of life, level of education and years of service of the professionals in the assisting professions affect their competences for psychosocial work, the results on the level of competences for psychosocial work with the following parameters were crossed: age, level of education and years of service. Table 2 shows the results indicating the correlation between psychosocial work competencies and the ages of professionals in assisting professions.

**Table 2:** Expertise competencies of assisting professions for psychosocial work with respect to age

Variable		N	M	SD	F	p
Psychosocial competencies	<b>Age of respondents</b>					
	to 30	18	19,17	2,98	3,152	0,018
	31-40	38	19,47	3,50		
	41-50	8	15,75	5,85		
	51-60	31	17,13	3,82		
	61 and more	5	15,80	6,26		
Total	100	18,21	4,06			

Table 2 shows that there is a significant statistical difference between the competences for psychosocial work and the age of the respondents ( $F = 3.152$ ;  $p = 0.018$ ). Respondents aged 31 to 40 years ( $M = 19.47$ ;  $SD = 3.50$ ) have the highest level of competencies, and the lowest levels of competences for psychosocial work are those aged 41 to 50 ( $M = 15.75$ ;  $SD = 5.85$ ) and 61 and older ( $M = 15.80$ ;  $SD = 6.26$ ).

This confirms the second specific hypothesis, according to which professionals in the assisting professions of younger age possess higher levels of competence for psychosocial work.

The following table (Table 3) shows the impact of education level on the development of psychosocial competencies.

**Table 3:** Competences of experts in assisting professions for psychosocial work about educational level

Variable		N	M	SD	F	p
Competences for psychosocial work	Level of education					
	High school	20	18,45	3,19	0,942	0,393
	Fakulty	67	18,42	4,15		
	Master's degree	13	16,77	4,73		
	<i>total</i>	100	18,21	4,06		

Based on the presented results (Table 3), it is concluded that the level of education of the respondents does not determine their competence for psychosocial work, i.e. that this difference is not statistically significant ( $F = 0.942$ ;  $p = 0.393$ ). Respondents with higher education (Masters) have a lower level of psychosocial competences ( $M = 16,77$ ;  $SD = 4,73$ ) compared to respondents with a lower educational level or higher education ( $M = 18,45$ ;  $SD = 3,19$ ) and faculty ( $M = 18,42$ ;  $SD = 4,15$ ).

Therefore, the third specific hypothesis according to which experts of assisting professions with higher education level, owned higher level of competence for psychosocial work, was not confirmed.

Table 4 shows how seniority is used at the level of psychosocial competencies of professionals in the assisting professions.

**Table 4:** Psychosocial work competences with respect to years of professional experience in assisting professions

Variable		N	M	SD	F	p
Psychosocial work competences	Years of service					
	to 5	31	18,68	3,55	1,517	0,204
	6 - 10	25	19,20	4,15		
	11 - 20	17	17,24	4,49		
	21 - 30	15	18,33	3,09		
	31 and more	12	16,17	5,06		
	<i>total</i>	100	18,21	4,06		

Based on the presentation (Table 4), it is observed that the difference between the psychosocial work competences and the years of work experience of the respondents has no statistical significance ( $F = 1,517$ ;  $p = 0.204$ ). However, the results show that the lowest level of psychosocial competences is found in the respondents with 31 years and more years of work experience ( $M = 16,17$ ;  $SD = 5,06$ ), and the respondents with between six and 10 years of experience have the highest level of psychosocial competences. This has proven that professionals in assisting professions with shorter work experience have higher levels of competence for psychosocial work.

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the professionals in the assisting professions have adequate competencies for performing psychosocial work, whereby professionals of younger age and shorter work experience have more developed competencies, while the degree of education is not crucial for competent performance of psychosocial work.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Most professionals in the assisting professions were found to possess empathy skills (79%), while 15% felt they did not possess this ability and 6% could not evaluate. This points to the need to develop the capacity to empathize with social work beneficiaries, since having empathy is a central competence for successful psychosocial work and a prerequisite for developing other qualities of the assisting process.

The high percentage of professionals possessing teamwork skills (77%) is in line with the fact that many centers of psychosocial work have developed long-term teamwork practices in many psychosocial work centers, resulting in most professionals having acquired this skill.

Most professionals in the assisting professions (71%) have mastered communication skills. For those who think they lack this skill (18%) and those who cannot assess whether they possess it (11%), additional training should be provided to develop skills such as active listening, asking open and closed questions, paraphrasing, reshaping, summarizing etc.

A significant percentage of skilled workers (36%) consider that they are not competent enough for the role of mediator. This indicates the need for skilled workers to go through a formal training process for a mediator. Moreover, in their daily work, they often play the role of mediators in resolving conflicts between the user and various factors in their social environment.

Younger and part-time respondents have a higher level of competence for psychosocial work than older and longer-term respondents. Due to many years of work in the profession, older professionals are more prone to professional combustion, while in younger ones the degree of professional combustion is lower and the enthusiasm and motivation for applying psychosocial work skills is higher. This can be considered a crucial factor, as long as the results of the research show that the level of formal education is not crucial to the competencies of psychosocial work professionals.

In order to prevent professional burnout and enhance professional competences for psychosocial work, professionals in the assisting professions should be provided with a specific type of training that empowers them as individuals and professionals. Supervision plays an indispensable role in this. Supervision plays a key role in the sense of competence and adult learning and is a process in which professionals develop self-esteem based on formed personal and professional identities [13]. The goal of supervision is to develop professional competence, which enables professionals to integrate their professional experience with the theories and requirements of their professional role, on the one hand, and with their traits, values, feelings and predispositions, on the other.

This form of support is also a legal obligation. "Social protection institutions are obliged to provide conditions for the introduction of supervision to professional workers and workers in other social protection activities, which provide organized and continuous professional support for better and more professional performance of services and provision of services to beneficiaries" [11]. Despite the legal obligation, this form of support in the centers for social work of the Republic of Srpska did not take effect. The use of supervision would encourage the personal growth of professionals and further develop their competences for psychosocial work. Today, supervision is a professional intervention necessary for the professional development of all those who work directly with people, especially people in assisting professions.

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