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Editorial

This journal focuses on research, policy and practice, and the application of our understandings to social work in Europe and beyond. We commend this issue to you as an exemplar of this. This issue is truly international in scope, featuring contributions from Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania, Poland, Germany, and Norway. The authors represent a diverse spectrum, ranging from students to professors, and include both academics and practitioners. In all, there are four articles, a book review, and a research note, covering a number of areas of importance to our developing knowledge in social work.

Interestingly, one theme of critical social work emerged organically as the backbone of this issue, without us intentionally announcing it as a special call. Three articles specifically address this framework.

The **first article**, "Civic-Minded Graduate in Social Work — Reflection from Slovakia and the Czech Republic", is authored by Zuzana Heinzová, Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová, and Ivana Hačková (Matej Bel University, Slovakia) alongside Nataša and Tatiana Matulayová (Silesian University, Czech Republic). They explore the concept of civic-mindedness, comparing its prevalence among graduates in their respective countries. This offers a compelling perspective on the role of modern universities in fostering civic competencies. Given global trends, a strong sense of civic responsibility is critical for social workers; their future profession demands robust advocacy and the defence of service users' rights — competencies that must be cultivated during their academic training.

The **second article**, "The Racialization of Vulnerability: How Begging and Trafficking Discourses Reinforce Anti-Roma Bias", by Alexandra Geisler (Dresden University of Applied Sciences, Germany) and Tomasz Nowicki (University of Gdańsk, Poland), further underscores the role of social work in supporting vulnerable and stigmatised populations. The authors argue for a decolonial, participatory, and intersectional framework for training social workers and developing practitioner competencies. This is a vital contribution, particularly as social work is increasingly practised within contexts of racism, exclusion, and oppression; consequently, methods for prevention and support are becoming ever more relevant.

Adding to the collection of critical social work is the **third article**, "Shared Power through Co-production and Easy-to-read (Preliminary Findings from Inclusive Research)". Authored by Lucia Cangárová (Trnava University, Slovakia), Peter Brnula (University in Bratislava, Slovakia), and Miroslav Cangár (University of Stavanger, Norway), this study describes the process of collaborating with people with disabilities. It demonstrates how their input is critical to the design of social work tools and shows how practitioners can utilise service user participation to ensure their voices are heard, fostering a sense of significance and influence.

A different, very novel, perspective is offered by the **article** "Consideration of the Role of Medication in Maintaining Abstinence in Social Work with Clients who Developed Alcohol Dependence during Maternity/Parental Leave", by Monika Holková and Martina Černá (College of Polytechnics Jihlava, Czech Republic). They highlight the specific issue of addiction developing during parental leave and the skills social workers need to recognise and address this problem during such a sensitive family period. Whilst addiction treatment is often medical, social workers

play a crucial role before, during, and after treatment — especially as medical professionals may overlook the children in the family. The authors note that while social workers must understand the role of medication, their primary function remains one of support and stability.

The issue also features a **review** of Carmen Marcela Ciornei's book "Social Welfare for Older Persons in Post-Communist Romania", written by Geta Mitrea (University Stefan cel Mare from Suceava, Romania). The review brilliantly presents this timely book. Its relevance extends far beyond Romania, resonating with the challenges faced by many post-communist nations grappling with shifting demographics.

Finally, the **research note** "'Heat Heroes' — The Importance of Educating Families in Local Communities for Protecting Children Aged 0 to 3 From Heat" (Julia Ernst et al., Catholic University of Applied Science North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany) supports the general thread of critical social work by demonstrating the importance of teaching parents advocacy and protection skills. It illustrates a transfer of knowledge from social workers through the community to parents. This note reflects the results of a 1.5-year project intended to provide valuable data for the field. Of particular interest is the study design, which tests varying degrees of researcher influence, showing how informal outreach can be effective for different social work objectives.

This issue is compact yet significant, reflecting the pressing agendas of our time. It is vital to continue examining these questions, and we invite our readers to join the discussion. We also extend our gratitude to all the reviewers; modern science would be impossible without their essential voluntary work, and this issue simply would not exist without them. Finally, we thank the wonderful Klara Březinová, whose invaluable help and nearly round-the-clock support enabled us to bring this issue to completion.

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A Civic-Minded Graduate in Social Work — Reflection from Slovakia and the Czech Republic

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Abstract
OBJECTIVES: This study aims to assess the development of civic competencies among social work graduates from selected universities in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. THEORETICAL BASE: Universities are increasingly responsible for fostering social change, and the concept of an engaged university is growing. Social work, dedicated to social justice, influences higher education and the competency development of future social workers, particularly in policy practice aimed at empowering clients. The civic dimension of social work education has become increasingly relevant due to global challenges. METHODS: A modified questionnaire (Steinberg, Hatcher, Bringle, 2011; Slovak translation Brozmanová, Heinzová, 2018) was used to assess graduates' civic competencies. The research sample comprised 320 social work graduates (bachelor's and master's degrees) from Slovakia and the Czech Republic in 2021. OUTCOMES: Slovak and Czech graduates demonstrated higher levels of civic competencies than their American counterparts. Slovak university graduates from part-time studies and those who already had work experience during their studies scored higher in civic-mindedness. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: The development of civic competencies requires intentional strategies to prepare students to empower their future clients and advocate for their rights and legally protected interests.

Keywords
civic-mindedness, civic competence, civic engagement, social work, education, civic-minded graduate

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, universities have increasingly engaged with their local communities. In this new model of engagement, community organisations and other stakeholders collaborate with university academic and other staff to develop learning and research agendas that account for the community's strengths and needs, drawing upon the expertise and resources available within the university. (Martin, Pyles, 2013). The concepts of an engaged university and university-community engagement are rooted in the American context. However, in the last decades, there has also been growing recognition of the concept of the engaged university in the European context. The European Commission (2017) stresses the role of higher education in addressing Europe's social and democratic challenges. This involves integrating local, regional, and societal issues into curricula, involving the community in teaching and research, providing adult education, and building connections with local communities. As stated by the European Economic and Social Committee (2015), the development of universities as knowledge centres prompts discussion of the fundamental characteristics of higher education that must underpin everyday practice. A common trend is the opening of higher education to public and private actors, student interests, cross-fertilisation of research and education, and greater cooperation and internationalisation. As Ramaley (2014) argues, there is an urgent need to reconsider how higher education can create a coherent and meaningful learning experience for today's students in a world characterised by turbulence, uncertainty, and fragmentation, and prepare them to address contemporary local and global challenges related to poverty, climate change, catastrophes, and crises. One change in higher education is the focus on civic competencies. In this context, the concept of the civic-minded graduate is discussed. Civic-mindedness constitutes a lifelong commitment to civic engagement and a sense of social responsibility (Sequeira et al., 2017).

The social work field, in particular, has embraced this community engagement model, with programs seeking to develop "civic-minded graduates" prepared to serve the public good (Gelmon et al., 2013). The Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014) describes social work as a profession and discipline that promotes social change and cohesion while empowering and liberating people. The definition particularly emphasises the principle of social justice. The concept of the civic-minded graduate closely aligns with the idea of social work as an agent of social change. It aligns with many of the values of the social work profession.

Civic-Minded Person and University Graduate

Most definitions of a civic-minded person focus on an individual's sense of identity as a community citizen, their sense of responsibility and attachment to that community, and the actions they take on behalf of the community (Billig, Good, 2013). Kober (2003) views civic orientation as an expression of an individual's dependence on the community. Civic-mindedness is a multidimensional concept with cognitive, affective, and conative elements. According to Bringle et al. (2011), civic-mindedness comprises a set of outcomes: knowledge, dispositions, skills, behavioural intentions, and behaviours. Civic-mindedness is not limited to universities; volunteers and community members outside academic settings can also be genuinely civic-minded. What distinguishes university-based civic-mindedness is its intentional integration with learning, reflection, and the development of civic identity within higher education. By contrast, the civic engagement of the general public is rooted more in personal values, lived experience, and a sense of belonging to a community. Social workers also display civic-mindedness, but theirs is shaped by a professional and ethical commitment to social justice and systemic change, rather than by educational goals or informal community participation.

Weber & Weber (2010) list three dimensions of civic-mindedness: self-efficacy to contribute time and service to the public good, civic participation, defined as the desire to support the less fortunate by volunteering time and money, and the role that universities should play in this process. Kober (2003) identified three civic-mindedness dimensions: a sense of community belonging, orientation toward the common good, and a willingness to work for the community.

The civic-minded graduate construct offers learning goals to guide curricula to develop civic competencies (Bringle, Hahn, Hatcher, 2019). From a higher education perspective, a civic-minded graduate is assumed to be someone who has graduated and has the ability and desire to work with others to achieve the common good (Bringle, Steinberg, 2010). It is an individual's sense of responsibility within the community. Hatcher (2008) defined a civic-minded professional as someone who possesses skills acquired through formal education, ethical dispositions related to social trust, and the ability to work democratically with others to achieve the public good.

North American studies (Bringle, Steinberg, 2010; Steinberg et al., 2011; Billig, Good, 2013; Crandall et al., 2013; Pike et al., 2014; Palombaro et al., 2017; Bringle et al., 2019) have focused on how community-based learning and service-learning affect higher education students. In Latin America, the idea of the civic-minded graduate is closely linked to civic education, community engagement, and solidarity service-learning (Tapia, 2012). The research on civic-mindedness is closely linked to university education. Adarlo et al. (2024) reflect that civic-mindedness is one construct of civic learning. However, it is not based solely on a literature review of civic outcomes arising from service-learning or similar community-based teaching and learning methods but also incorporates experts' and practitioners' viewpoints. Civic-mindedness integrates one's identity and educational and civic experiences (Bringle, Clayton, 2012). Civic-mindedness is rooted in one's social context (Bringle, Wall, 2020) and shaped by societal norms (Steinberg et al., 2011).

In the European context, The Council of Europe's (2016) framework for Competences for a Democratic Culture defines civic mindedness as an attitude towards a community or social group that includes: a sense of belonging and identification with the community; mindfulness of others and the effects of one's actions; a sense of solidarity and willingness to cooperate;

interest and attentiveness to community issues; a sense of civic duty and willingness to contribute to the community and participate in decisions about community issues; a commitment to fulfil responsibilities connected with the roles and positions in the community; and a sense of responsibility and accountability to others.

In the Slovak context, the concept of the civic-minded graduate was introduced by Brozmanová Gregorová and Heinzová (2023) in relation to the engaged university and the development of civic-mindedness in Europe. However, practice across European countries varies considerably. In line with Thomson et al. (2010), this discussion underscores that different political systems require distinct civic skills, a perspective also reflected in social work education and practice.

Civic-Minded Social Work Graduate

As Twill and Lowe (2014) note, civic-mindedness and engagement have unique implications for social workers because the profession's values imply that such engagement is a requirement rather than an optional skill to be developed. The call to ethical engagement for the public good overlaps with social work's commitment to creating a world where all individuals can thrive and achieve their full potential.

However, the profession's values are not embraced similarly in all contexts. Although social work practice has a long history of community engagement and deep roots in macro practice, which involves work within the community and toward system-level change, it has shifted away from social change towards models that focus more on individual cases and their resolution over time. (Reisch, 2016). As reported by Walters et al. (2024), in the last decade, a growing recognition of the need for system-level solutions has spurred a resurgence in macro practice and an interest in working across system levels to effect change for social work clients. As Agnew (2010) stated, a century later, Richmond's aspiration to foster an integrated practice of individual care and social reform rooted in a civic ethos remains a worthy, perhaps necessary, ideal for social workers.

How social workers see their roles as citizens is also important (Twill, Lowe, 2014). Hylton (2015) sees civic engagement as pivotal to the social work profession's survival and its historical role in shaping the social contract. She also noted that social work does not monopolise understanding, teaching, or advancing civic engagement. However, social workers have an ethical charge to promote civic engagement because of their duty to the marginalised, vulnerable, and less influential in society. Social workers should engage civically and must practice civic engagement with civil literacy (Young, Granruth, 2024). Civic knowledge in social work is a necessary precondition for competent advocacy or policy practice (McCabe et al., 2016). Although the term civic-mindedness is widely used today, the underlying idea is not new. A critical stance toward political structures and an active commitment to community life can already be found in the early 20th century, particularly among pioneers of social reform and social work such as Alice Salomon, Jane Addams, and Saul Alinsky. Their approaches to community organising, democratic participation, and social advocacy embodied core elements of what is now described as civic-mindedness, even if the concept had not yet been formalised under that label. Today's social workers play a crucial role in advocating for the rights of marginalised communities and promoting social change. This role can be theoretically grounded in Critical Theory, particularly the work of Theodor W. Adorno, whose critique of instrumental rationality and domination highlights how social inequalities are structurally produced and reproduced in modern societies (Horkheimer, Adorno, 2002). Building on this tradition, critical social work conceptualises social problems not as individual deficits but as outcomes of historically embedded power relations, emphasising reflexivity, emancipation, and practice oriented to social justice (Allan, Briskman, Pease, 2009). Their commitment to community empowerment goes beyond traditional social work practices, as they actively engage in activities that address the root causes of social issues. By fostering a deep understanding of the structural inequalities within society, civic-minded social workers can develop targeted interventions that have a lasting impact on the individuals and communities they serve. Furthermore, civic-minded social

workers are responsible for collaborating with diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organisations, and community groups, to create sustainable solutions to complex social problems. Through building coalitions and advocating for policy changes, social work can influence systemic reform and address the underlying issues that perpetuate social injustice.

The professional competence of social workers to engage in political practice regarding client involvement and empowerment is a gradually emerging topic of discourse in social work (e.g., Zogata-Kusz, 2020; Zogata-Kusz, Navrátil, Matulayová, 2022; Vojtíšek, Matulayová, 2023). In the Czech-Slovak social work discourse, the issue of social work as an instrument of social change is sporadically discussed (e.g., Chytil, Kowaliková, 2018).

Lucas-Darby (2011) analyses civic competences in ecological social work. Social workers are advocates for change and all aspects of social justice, including concerns about the environment in which groups and communities exist. Social work education is critical in fostering environmental stewardship and civic responsibility among students. By expanding their knowledge and engagement opportunities, social work programs can empower students to contribute to their communities' environmental conservation and sustainability efforts. Institutions respond by integrating sustainability into social work curricula.

According to Young & Granruth (2024), social work programs and educators must ensure that social work students, and thus future practitioners, are prepared to engage civically. By being mindful of civic practices while preparing social work students for civic engagement, programs can help their students increase their civic literacy and meet the necessary competency requirements.

The concept of the civic-minded graduate is applied to competency-based social worker education. Global standards for social work education and training (Ioakimidis, Sookraj, 2021) adopted at the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) General Assemblies in 2020 in the Core Curriculum divided into Social Work in Context and Social Work in Practice mention a set of knowledge and skills of social work graduates aligned with the concept of civic mindedness. According to these global standards, a social work graduate understands systemic injustices, historical inequalities, and the impact of culture, policies, and environmental factors on communities. They advocate for human rights, social justice, gender equity, and the well-being of marginalised populations. They engage in policy-making, social change, and environmental justice while promoting peace, sustainability, and collaboration across professions. A civic-minded social work graduate fosters inclusive, non-oppressive relationships at all levels of society, advocating for marginalised voices and ensuring diverse perspectives are heard. They integrate personal values, ethics, theory, and research into practice while critically analysing social policies and interventions. Their approach is rooted in empowerment, human development, and social justice, and draws on peacebuilding, advocacy, and strengths-based problem-solving. They remain self-reflective, ethical, and collaborative as they navigate power dynamics to drive meaningful social change.

Among the nine competencies of social workers in the USA, at least three are closely related to civic competencies: Advancing Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice; engaging in Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Practice; and engaging in Policy Practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2022).

Kachel (2022) in The State of Civics Education in Social Work Programs in Germany reflects on current issues in political social work in Germany and notes the diversity in approaches to teaching civic and political skills to social work students resulting in the fact that political knowledge and interest, practical skills, preparation, and the ability to speak politically can differ dramatically among social workers—which, in turn, influences the ability and willingness for political action.

In Slovakia, the description of the social work education standards included in the System of Study Fields of Higher Education (Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth, 2019) lists the competencies of a master's degree graduate. Competence in line with the advocacy social work is the ability to represent and promote the interests of vulnerable groups.

Currently, the Czech Association of Educators in Social Work is discussing a draft model based on the results of two projects. One of the proposed competences is the competence "Engage in advocacy for human rights, social and environmental justice".
Abroad, the theme of developing social work students' civic competencies and the concept of civic-minded graduates, similar to other curricula, is mainly reflected in conjunction with courses based on community-based learning and service-learning (e.g. Lucas-Darby, 2011; Aguiniga, Bowers, 2019; Gruslyte, 2021; Shanti et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2024).
The perspectives of graduating social work students can influence the profession's future direction. Although not exclusively studying social work students, Fenzel & Payrot (2005) discovered that civic engagement during college positively impacted post-college attitudes toward social responsibility, political involvement, and volunteerism. Likewise, Astin et al. (1999) analysed behavioural patterns. They found that individuals who volunteered during college were more likely to contribute financially to their alma mater, continue volunteering after graduation, and interact with a more diverse range of people than those who were not civically engaged.
In the Czech and Slovak context, no research has yet been conducted to map the civic competences of social work graduates. A research reflection on the application of the concept of citizenship by social work students during practical education in Norway was carried out by Šolcová, Tokovská, and Kozubík (2022). In their study, Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2019) identified the benefits of applying service-learning strategies in developing civic engagement and personal and social responsibility among social work students.
In order to contribute to the academic debate and develop a better understanding of the specific aspects of this civic-minded graduate concept in Slovak and Czech social work settings, we aim to answer the following research questions:

- What is the civic-mindedness level of social work graduates at selected Slovak and Czech universities?
- Are there differences in civic-mindedness between Slovak graduates and Czech universities?
- Are there differences in civic-mindedness between full-time and part-time graduates?
- Are there differences in civic-mindedness between graduates regarding their practical experience?

METHODOLOGY

The research sample was selected through purposive sampling in collaboration with universities offering social work degree programs. The aim was to reach graduates immediately after completing their final state exams, as this moment ensures the most accurate recall of their study experience. Universities were approached based on existing research collaborations and their willingness to facilitate access to graduates. Participation was open to all students completing their final examinations during the data collection period, and all who consented were included in the sample. The research sample consisted of 320 social work graduates of bachelor's and master's studies in the academic year 2021 in Slovakia (N=208) and the Czech Republic (N=112). The questionnaire was anonymous and voluntary; by completing it, respondents agreed to participate in the research. The research sample was predominantly female (N=276; 86.3%). The mean age was 29.33 (SD=10.03). Graduates of the following universities were represented in the research: Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice (N=22), University of Prešov (N=24), Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (N=43), Catholic University in Ružomberok (N=49), University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra (N=15), University of Cyril and Methodius in Trnava (20), University of Trnava (N=6), University of Health and Social Work, St. Alžbeta University in Bratislava (N=25), Charles University in Prague (N=43), University in Olomouc (N=41), and University of Ostrava (N=35). More than 50% of graduates from each university participated in the research in a given year.

The study employed a quantitative research design using a standardised survey method. The primary research technique was a structured questionnaire, specifically the Civic-Minded Graduate (CMG) scale (Steinberg, Hatcher, Bringle, 2011; Slovak translation Brozmanová Gregorová, Heinzová, 2018), which measures civic-mindedness across ten domains. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed in cooperation with universities after state final examinations. The data collection technique combined paper-and-pencil administration and an online survey format, depending on the university's procedures. The analysis was based on respondents' Likert-scale responses, supplemented by demographic and study-related variables included in the questionnaire. The original questionnaire consists of 30 items; the Slovak version contains 28 items (two items were excluded from the Slovak translation because they were semantically equivalent in the Slovak context), which are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 — strongly disagree to 6 — strongly agree). The items are worded so that the graduate always comments on whether studying at a given university has helped him/her acquire a given knowledge, skill or disposition. The CMG takes approximately 7 to 10 minutes to administer. The Cronbach's alpha for the CMG scale was .968, indicating good internal consistency.
We selected the scale based on a study by Brozmanová Gregorová, and Heinzová (2023), which demonstrated that the CMG construct applies in our setting.
Based on the descriptive indicators (skewness and acuity coefficients), we did not observe a significant deviation from normal in the CMG questionnaire's observed variables, so we used non-parametric procedures in the statistical analysis.

RESULTS

In Table 1, we approximate the CMG questionnaire variables using descriptive characteristics across the sample.

Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of the CMG questionnaire and its subscales of social work graduates (N=320)

Subscales	Mean	SD	Median	Skewness	Kurtosis
Knowledge					
Knowledge of ways of civic participation	4.08	1.17	4.3	-0.344	-0.566
Understanding of the relevance and applicability of knowledge and skills acquired during studies for solving societal problems	4.60	1.14	4.7	-0.956	0.495
Awareness of contemporary social problems and their local, national and global context	4.88	1.17	5.0	-1.315	1.281
Skills					
Ability to communicate appropriately in writing and orally with others and to accept different points of view	4.89	1.19	5.0	-1.223	0.984
Understanding and appreciation of diversity, ability to work with it, and sensitivity to diversity in a pluralistic society	4.65	1.12	5.0	-0.838	0.157
Ability to work with other people, including those with differing views, to reach an agreement/consensus or arrive at a solution to a problem	4.56	1.15	4.5	-0.897	0.487
Dispositions					
Understanding of the importance of civic engagement and active involvement in social issues	4.67	1.17	5.0	-0.942	0.237
Ability to actively engage with a realistic view of whether the activity will achieve the desired outcomes	4.53	1.06	4.7	-0.740	0.135

A sense of responsibility and commitment to use the knowledge gained during higher education for the benefit of others	4.68	1.11	5.0	-1.072	1.040
Behavioural intentions					
An interest in getting personally involved in activities to benefit society or the community in the future	4.27	1.27	4.7	-0.740	-0.110
Overall CMG	*4.54*	*1.01*	*4.8*	*-0.964*	*0.662*

The overall mean score of social work graduates in CMG was 4.54 (SD=1.01). However, the highest scores were in the knowledge subscale, perception of contemporary social problems and their local, national, and global context (4.88, SD=1.17), and in the skills subscale, ability to communicate appropriately in writing and orally with others and to accept different opinions (4.89, SD=1.19). Knowledge of civic participation was the lowest-rated skill (4.08, SD=1.17).
Our second research question verified the difference between social work graduates in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The differences are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Differences in CMG between social work graduates from Czech (N=112) and Slovak (N=208) universities

Subscales		Mean	Median	Mann Whitney	p-value
Knowledge					
Knowledge of ways of civic participation	SK	4.27	4.3	-4.068	0.000
	CZ	3.74	3.7		
Understanding of the relevance and applicability of knowledge and skills acquired during studies for solving societal problems	SK	4.77	5.0	-5.005	0.000
	CZ	4.28	4.3		
Awareness of contemporary social problems and their local, national and global context	SK	4.92	5.3	-1.788	0.074
	CZ	4.82	5.0		
Skills					
Ability to communicate appropriately in writing and orally with others and to accept different points of view	SK	4.9	5.3	-0.555	0.579
	CZ	4.88	5.0		
Understanding and appreciation of diversity, ability to work with it, sensitivity to diversity in a pluralistic society	SK	4.77	5.0	-3.563	0.000
	CZ	4.42	4.3		
Ability to work with other people, including those with differing views, to reach agreement/consensus or arrive at a solution to a problem	SK	4.64	5.0	-2.624	0.009
	CZ	4.41	4.5		
Dispositions					
Understanding of the importance of civic engagement and active involvement in social issues	SK	4.79	5.3	-3.832	0.000
	CZ	4.43	4.7		
Ability to actively engage with a realistic view of whether the activity will achieve the desired outcomes	SK	4.62	5.0	-3.035	0.002
	CZ	4.34	4.3		
A sense of responsibility and commitment to use the knowledge gained during higher education for the benefit of others	SK	4.81	5.0	-4.793	0.000
	CZ	4.43	4.3		

Behavioural intentions					
An interest in getting personally involved in activities to benefit society or the community in the future	SK	4.37	4.7	-2.556	0.011
	CZ	4.1	4.0		
Overall CMG	SK	4.67	5.0	-4.382	0.000
	CZ	4.32	4.3		

According to the statistical validation results, there is a difference between Slovak and Czech graduates in the overall CMG rate and in 8 of 10 subscales. All differences favour Slovak graduates. In the third research question, we asked whether there is a difference between full-time and part-time social work graduates. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Differences in CMG between full-time (N=231) and part-time (N=89) social work graduates

	Form of study	Mean	Median	Mann Whitney	p-value
Knowledge					
Knowledge of ways of civic participation	Full-time	4.02	4.3	-1.444	0.149
	Part-time	4.25	4.3		
Understanding of the relevance and applicability of knowledge and skills acquired during studies for solving societal problems	Full-time	4.48	4.7	-3.11	0.002
	Part-time	4.93	5.3		
Awareness of contemporary social problems and their local, national and global context	Full-time	4.78	5.0	-2.169	0.03
	Part-time	5.14	5.3		
Skills					
Ability to communicate appropriately in writing and orally with others and to accept different points of view	Full-time	4.81	5.0	-1.956	0.05
	Part-time	5.12	5.5		
Understanding and appreciation of diversity, ability to work with it, and sensitivity to diversity in a pluralistic society	Full-time	4.57	4.7	-2.14	0.032
	Part-time	4.87	5.0		
Ability to work with other people, including those with differing views, to reach an agreement/consensus or arrive at a solution to a problem	Full-time	4.48	4.5	-1.808	0.071
	Part-time	4.75	5.0		
Dispositions					
Understanding of the importance of civic engagement and active involvement in social issues	Full-time	4.56	5.0	-2.519	0.012
	Part-time	4.94	5.0		
Ability to actively engage with a realistic view of whether the activity will achieve the desired outcomes	Full-time	4.41	4.7	-3.112	0.002
	Part-time	4.83	5.0		
A sense of responsibility and commitment to use the knowledge gained during higher education for the benefit of others	Full-time	4.55	4.7	-3.283	0.001
	Part-time	5.01	5.0		

Behavioural intentions					
An interest in getting personally involved in activities to benefit society or the community in the future	Full-time	4.17	4.3	-1.917	0.055
	Part-time	4.52	4.7		
Overall CMG	Full-time	4.44	4.7	-2.941	0.003
	Part-time	4.81	5.0		

Differences between social work graduates in their study mode were observed in the overall CMG score and in nine of the 10 subscales, all favouring part-time graduates.
In the last research question, we tested whether there is an association between graduates' work experience outside field practice education during their studies and the CMG rate. The findings are captured in Table 3. Meanwhile, 146 respondents had work experience within social work, 106 graduates had work experience outside social work, and 67 respondents had no work experience.

Table 4: Differences in CMG between social work graduates concerning work experience

	Work experience	Mean	Median	Kruskall-Wallis	p-value
Knowledge					
Knowledge of ways of civic participation	Yes, out of SW	4.2	4.3	3.558	0.169
	Yes, in SW	4.11	4.3		
	No	3.81	4.0		
Understanding of the relevance and applicability of knowledge and skills acquired during studies for solving societal problems	Yes, out of SW	4.71	4.7	10.428	0.005
	Yes, in SW	4.74	5.0		
	No	4.11	4.3		
Awareness of contemporary social problems and their local, national and global context	Yes, out of SW	5.1	5.3	13.014	0.001
	Yes, in SW	4.98	5.0		
	No	4.3	4.7		
Skills					
Ability to communicate appropriately in writing and orally with others and to accept different points of view	Yes, out of SW	5.01	5.5	3.704	0.157
	Yes, in SW	4.97	5.0		
	No	4.52	5.0		
Understanding and appreciation of diversity, ability to work with it, and sensitivity to diversity in a pluralistic society	Yes, out of SW	4.79	5.0	9.74	0.008
	Yes, in SW	4.73	5.0		
	No	4.25	4.3		
Ability to work with other people, including those with differing views, to reach an agreement/consensus or arrive at a solution to a problem	Yes, out of SW	4.68	5.0	9.941	0.007
	Yes, in SW	4.69	5.0		
	No	4.05	4.5		
Dispositions					
Understanding of the importance of civic engagement and active involvement in social issues	Yes, out of SW	4.77	5.0	11.471	0.003
	Yes, in SW	4.81	5.0		
	No	4.18	4.3		

Ability to actively engage with a realistic view of whether the activity will achieve the desired outcomes	Yes, out of SW	4.65	4.7	9.271	0.01
	Yes, in SW	4.62	4.7		
	No	4.12	4.0		
A sense of responsibility and commitment to use the knowledge gained during higher education for the benefit of others	Yes, out of SW	4.86	5.0	11.698	0.003
	Yes, in SW	4.77	5.0		
	No	4.17	4.3		
Behavioural intentions					
An interest in getting personally involved in activities to benefit society or the community in the future	Yes, out of SW	4.4	4.7	13.836	0.001
	Yes, in SW	4.42	4.7		
	No	3.73	4.0		
Overall CMG	Yes, out of SW	4.69	4.9	11.461	0.003
	Yes, in SW	4.65	4.8		
	No	4.08	4.1		

Differences in practice experience during study outside field practice education were demonstrated across the overall CMG scale and 8 subscales out of 10. However, the results favour graduates with practice experience both within and outside social work. Those with no experience achieved the lowest scores. On some scales, graduates with work experience outside social work score higher than those with experience within social work; the reverse is true for others. The analysis shows that work experience is important in explaining the differences, not whether it is within or outside social work.

DISCUSSION

The mapping of CMG in social work graduates at selected Slovak and Czech universities showed that graduates achieved an overall CMG level of 4.54 (SD=1.01). The data can be compared with the results of a study conducted at a selected university in Slovakia (Brozmanová Gregorová, Heinzová, 2023), where the overall score was 3.72 (SD=0.89), and with studies conducted in the American context. In the American studies by Bringle, Hahn and Hatcher (2019), the authors surveyed both undergraduate and graduate students across a wide range of degree programs (e.g., education, nursing, business, liberal arts). The reported overall CMG scores were 4.32 (SD = 1.03) in Study 1 and 4.15 (SD=0.92) in Study 2, based on substantially larger samples (N = 1,772 in total across both studies). Given that their samples included undergraduates at different stages of their studies and from diverse disciplines (not exclusively helping professions), it is not surprising that our measured values among social work graduates at the end of their degree programme are higher. Social work students typically show stronger civic orientation and prosocial commitment due to the nature of their professional training and practicum experiences. Higher levels of CMG may indicate more developed civic competencies among social work graduates than among graduates of other disciplines, and thus a greater readiness to practise as a civic-minded professional. Social workers can influence social work practice not only as professionals but also as citizens. The concept of the civic-minded graduate is significant not only in social work education but also in citizenship education and in the promotion of democratic values. The attitudes of graduating social work students can set the tone for the profession's future; therefore, fostering civic-mindedness is also an important topic for social work education.

Graduates of social work study programmes at selected Slovak universities achieved higher levels of civic competencies than graduates of Czech universities. One limitation of our research is the limited representation of students completing their final year at universities in the Czech Republic (only three schools). This fact might have distorted the presented result. When interpreting the results, several factors warrant further research. These may include students' socio-economic situation, political preferences and involvement, previous or current volunteering or work experience, etc. We also do not exclude the influence of the political situation in Slovakia over the past few years. Some student respondents from Slovakia may respond to the polarising political and socio-economic situation with an increased civic-mindedness. These themes are also reflected by students and teachers in the classroom and in various discussions and activities. The themes of political practice, civil society, the struggle for democracy, discrimination, and many others undoubtedly appear in courses (subjects) in sociology, social policy, ethics, social work with different population groups, etc.

In our research, part-time graduates demonstrated a higher level of civic-mindedness than full-time graduates. We assume that some known characteristics and circumstances of studying in a part-time form were manifested here. Still, we also see a connection with work experience: most part-time students work full-time.

The research results suggest a correlation between work experience and civic-mindedness. The combination of work-study creates opportunities for students to directly apply theoretical knowledge in practice and, in turn, to bring that understanding back into the classroom to discuss. These students often have ideological/political viewpoints and concrete experience in applying and defending them, at least in their work teams, professional and civic associations, etc. We assume they have life and work experiences advocating for subjectively understood social justice. We can only assume that students who aspire to contribute to solving social problems or to social change choose to study social work. This finding is inconsistent with a study in the U.S. (Twill, Lowe, 2014), which found that whether a social work graduate was employed, seeking employment, or unemployed did not affect the scores achieved.

This study has several limitations. The absence of a control group and reliance on self-reported, declarative items may inflate civic-mindedness scores, especially in a field where prosocial attitudes are expected. We also did not include behavioural indicators or detailed work-context variables, limiting the interpretation of why graduates working outside social work showed higher scores in some areas. Differences from U.S. studies may partly reflect differences in sample composition.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential to reflect critically on the role of social work in a democratic society. Developing democracy and citizenship is a complex and often conflicting historical process. Social work occupies different positions in the political and social concepts of citizenship. Regarding political citizenship, social workers support citizens' political engagement in favour of democracy. In contrast, in the case of social rights, they are more in the position of social policy implementers and focus on social cohesion. However, in the field of education, despite the persistent tensions in both conceptions of citizenship, it is circular to conceptualise democracy as an open and ongoing process, which then allows us to answer the question of how social work can relate to education for democracy (Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2014).

The subjective construction and understanding of social justice influence social work students' political and civic engagement (Richards-Schuster et al., 2019). Therefore, this issue needs increased attention in both research and education. The authors note that the lack of a clear definition of social justice leads students to differ in their understanding and implementation of the concept in their actions.

Fostering civic growth in students, including those for whom civic domains are underdeveloped, undersized, or poorly integrated into their identity, presents a fundamental educational challenge (Bringle, Wall, 2020). In the context of global issues and grand challenges for social work (Vojtíšek, Matulayová, 2023), it appears crucial to explore alternative strategies in education. The research results show some reserves, mainly in full-time studies, i.e., for students who are usually without work experience or at the beginning of their professional career. One pedagogical strategy may be the application of community-based learning and service-learning, which has been proven by several studies as an effective strategy for social work education (see, for example, Lucas-Darby, 2011; Aguiniga, Bowers, 2019; Claes et al., 2021; Shanti, 2021; Walters et al., 2024).

Other strategies, such as strengthening support for student engagement, promoting civic education in collaboration with universities, developing a third mission for schools and the concept of the engaged university, are also worthy of consideration. Young & Granruth (2024) cite numerous strategies for developing students' civic competencies in social work curricula. We agree with Kachel (2022) that civic education in social work studies can and should occur through formal and informal learning experiences. Civic skills can be developed through hands-on activities and experiential learning, where students can engage in real-world political speech or action. The students can design and direct these experiences, with faculty members providing guidance and resources. Such experiential learning opportunities may be more effective than teaching methods focused solely on theoretical knowledge. The educational experiences can involve engaging with communities and individuals to understand their needs and challenges firsthand. By immersing themselves in real-world experiences, social work students gain a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that impact the communities they serve. Such experiential learning enhances their academic knowledge and fosters empathy and cultural competence, essential qualities for effective social work practice (Gray, Gibbons, 2003; Robinson, 2018).

Civic-mindedness in social work can be fostered through mandatory field practice as an integral component of the curriculum. In both Czechia and Slovakia, a compulsory field practice is an established and mandatory component of social work study programmes. It provides students with structured, practice-based learning, offering clear potential for developing civic-mindedness. However, our analysis suggests that such learning outcomes do not emerge automatically from participation in field practice alone. The extent to which compulsory internships support civic learning depends on the intentional integration of civic goals, including reflection on social responsibility, community engagement, and the public role of social work. Without this explicit civic framing, compulsory practice risks remaining primarily skills-oriented rather than serving as a meaningful space for civic learning.

While social work education offers multiple opportunities to foster civic-mindedness, significant challenges remain. Civic engagement must be embedded as a core element of the curriculum, rather than treated as an optional add-on, and supported through educational models that integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion while addressing systemic barriers and power imbalances. In conclusion, fostering civic-minded graduates in social work is a multifaceted endeavour that requires alignment across educational institutions, providers of social work services, and governing bodies. By embracing this challenge and leveraging opportunities for innovation and collaboration, the field of social work can cultivate a cadre of professionals deeply committed to advancing social justice, empowering communities, and driving meaningful change. The concept of civic-minded graduates in social work is integral to reaching a more just and equitable society. Their unwavering dedication to community empowerment and social justice catalyses positive change, and their efforts reverberate across the social fabric, creating a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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The Racialization of Vulnerability: How Begging and Trafficking Discourses Reinforce Anti-Rroma Bias

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Abstract
OBJECTIVES**:** This article investigates how racialized and essentialist narratives influence academic and policy discourses on begging and human trafficking, particularly regarding the Rroma community. It aims to expose the ways in which these narratives legitimize structural discrimination and exclusion. THEORETICAL BASE**:** The study is grounded in critical social work theory, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Bobako, 2017), with a focus on racialization, scientific racism, and the construction of "otherness." METHODS**:** The article is based on the findings of two independent empirical studies looking at the two axes: human trafficking and begging. In relation to the thematic areas under analysis, the triangulation of data and methods is used in both independent research projects (Flick, 1991) and conducted for this theoretical analysis. OUTCOMES**:** Findings reveal that both axes construct Rroma either as passive victims or active perpetrators, erasing structural causes of poverty and trafficking. Racialized representations—e.g., the "happy beggar" or the patriarchal Rroma exploiter—perpetuate stereotypes and obscure socio-political realities. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS**:** Social work must adopt decolonial, participatory, and intersectional frameworks to resist reproducing discriminatory discourses and instead empower marginalized communities as agents of their own narratives (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Keywords
racial profiling, scientific racism, human trafficking, Anti-*Rroma*, begging discourse, structural violence, policy analysis, social work

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INTRODUCTION

This article brings together the findings of two independent empirical studies that investigated the nexus of ethnicity, begging, and human trafficking in relation to the Rroma ethnicity. Although conducted separately, in different countries and with different methodologies, both studies arrived at strikingly similar conclusions: the dominant academic and institutional discourses on Rroma are shaped less by empirical evidence than by racialized assumptions, essentialist stereotypes, and a lack of engagement with the lived realities of those affected.

What unites the two research strands is the recognition that both begging and human trafficking are repeatedly framed through ethnicized and moralizing narratives that obscure their structural causes: poverty, migration restrictions, labour market exclusion, housing segregation, and systemic racism. In both fields, Rroma are categorised through a persistent victim/perpetrator dichotomy: either as passive, culturally backward victims in need of rescue, or as active exploiters and criminals. Their own voices, strategies, and socio-economic constraints are almost completely absent from mainstream research and policy debates.

By placing the themes of human trafficking and begging side by side, this article demonstrates for the first time that the same mechanisms of racialization, pathologization, and exclusion operate across both discourses. In doing so, it argues that the question is not only why Rroma beg or why Roma are vulnerable to human trafficking, but why research continues to reproduce explanations rooted in cultural deficit rather than structural inequality. Instead of repeating classifications that have historically justified surveillance and securitization, this article calls for an intersectional and participatory research approach that recognizes Rroma individuals as agents rather than objects of knowledge.

The contribution of this article is therefore twofold:

- Empirical — it synthesizes findings from two pioneering studies in a research field where contemporary data remain scarce.
- Critical-theoretical — it exposes how knowledge production itself becomes part of the marginalization process, especially when the voices of those most affected are systematically excluded.

The aim of the article is not to "add" begging to human trafficking or vice versa, but to show how both fields, when viewed together, reveal a shared pattern of racialized knowledge-making that continues to shape social work practice, public policy, and academic research.

In summary, in this article the theoretical analysis is inspired by selected elements of postcolonial theory (Madew, Boryczko, Lusk, 2023) as well as critical social work theory, as a theoretical approach that examines and challenges social inequality and processes of exclusion (Lutz, 2020). In relation to the thematic areas under analysis, the triangulation of data and methods is used in the two independent research projects (Flick, 1991).

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDING OF THE TWO AXES: HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND BEGGING

Human Trafficking

The nexus of social work, gender, and migration in the context of the independent empirical study on human trafficking (Geisler, 2015) is theoretically grounded in critical ethnicity studies, intersectional feminism, and theories of power and othering. Ethnicity is understood not as an essential, primordial category, but as a *social construction* produced through processes of boundary-making, stereotyping, and domination (Capotorti, 1977:13; Peterson Smith, 1982:1). The construction of *Rroma* as a minority is linked to political regimes of belonging, where dominant groups define normality and justify exclusion through culturalized discourses (Brubaker, 1989:4; Barlösius, 2004:60). In this logic, trafficking discourses reproduce ethnicized and gendered

stereotypes by depicting *Rromnia* simultaneously as passive victims of patriarchy and as culturally backward (Trávníčková et al., 2004:4; Limanowska, 2005:64). Intersectionality thus becomes central, as ethnicity, gender, class and migration status co-produce vulnerability in a context of structural racism, poverty and limited institutional access (Hooks, 1984:5; Lorde, 2012:98). The research challenges essentialist explanations and instead conceptualizes trafficking not as a cultural problem of "*the Rroma*", but as an outcome of broader socio-political inequalities, discrimination, and exclusionary state practices.

The research employs a mixed-methods research design to analyse the nexus of gender, ethnicity and human trafficking involving Rroma. This combines methodologically quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to capture the multidimensional construction of human trafficking (Creswell, Plano Clark, 2018). The study follows a triangulation strategy, based on the assumption that "different methods do not merely capture different aspects of the same phenomenon, but each method constitutes its own specific object of inquiry" (Flick,1991:433). The quantitative component consists of a multi-country questionnaire survey among social work professionals in Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, enabling descriptive comparison of institutional attitudes and stereotypes (Tashakkori, Teddlie, 2010). The qualitative strand is based on problem-centred interviews (Witzel, Reiter, 2012; Kvale, Brinkmann, 2015) with social work professionals and with self-identified Rroma affected by trafficking and forced migration in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, allowing the reconstruction of meaning-making processes.

Table 1: Overview of the Mixed-Methods Research Design and Sample

Stage	Participants	Recruitment / Context
survey	79 valid responses from employees of social/ anti-trafficking projects in Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania	E-mail distribution list of 370 institutions
interviews with professionals	22 staff members of anti-trafficking social projects	employees working directly with trafficking victims; roles include social workers, outreach staff, project coordinators
interviews with Rroma	24 self-identified Rroma trafficking survivors	contacted through NGOs and support networks in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, as well as streetwork and outreach work in segregated ghettos and institutions

The qualitative analysis followed Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss, Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2014), enabling inductive category-building and theory development from the data. The quantitative strand provided descriptive and comparative insights into dominant attitudes among professionals. Triangulation across datasets is understood not merely as validation, but as *"the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon"* (Denzin, 1978), increasing analytical depth rather than aiming at simple confirmation.

Ethical challenges were central due to the involvement of a highly stigmatized minority, as well as topics associated with victimization, illegality and the risk of reproducing culturalized victim narratives (Zimmerman, Watts, 2003). The research followed a transformative ethics approach (Mertens, 2007), foregrounding informed consent, participant agency and reflexivity, especially in relation to power asymmetries in research with trafficked and marginalized populations (Israel, Hay, 2006; Tracy, 2010).

Begging

The method for analysis of the scholarly discourse on begging was inspired by selected elements of postcolonial theory, critical discourse analysis, and content analysis. From the perspective of analytical practice, the collected materials were interpreted using postcolonial theory. I was inspired by the perspective of applying postcolonial theory's tools to the analysis of social work (Madew, Boryczko, Lusk, 2023) and the concept of racialization (Bobako, 2010). The concept of cultural racism (Bobako, 2010:165) distinguishes biological racism from racialization, explaining that it is a process of reifying, essentializing, and naturalizing cultural traits attributed to a given social group to create specific power relations. In the case of research on begging, these were the adopted research orientations and their methodological implementation, as well as the ideologies underlying these positions, which can be treated as a specific form of scientific discourse entangled with Foucault's dualism of knowledge/power (Foucault, 1999; 2010). In turn, the empirical data generated in the study allowed for the search for power/knowledge structures and their connections with the formation of an individual (Rehman, Alharthi, 2016:57). In the context of social work understood as a scientific discipline implemented at the intersection of theory and practice, I will discuss the real and material consequences for the practice of counteracting begging, which are justified by the knowledge generated and the theory that creates a framework for social policy implemented by social welfare centres.

Since the aim of the study was to analyse the scientific discourse of begging, the choice of research method was dictated by the need to generate discourse. I opted for critical discourse analysis, using which I identified patterns and meanings attributed to begging in empirical research (Van Dijk, 1993:259). The process consisted of three stages. The first step concerned the written texts. At this stage, the thematic structure of the texts was identified and analysed. With respect to the written texts, the research material was treated as a first-degree construct, i.e., the categories used by the authors of the begging studies were organized through analysis into second-degree categories—created during the analysis (Jabłońska, 2013:56). During the final step of the analysis, the texts were placed in relation to the structures, practices, impacts of discourses, and their consequences. The main research problem was formulated as follows: How is the phenomenon of begging and the "beggar" constructed in empirical research on this topic?

The research sample was selected based on time, type of research, and subject matter. With respect to the time criteria, the author assumed that the subject of the study would be texts written from the beginning of the Third Polish Republic, i.e., published after 1989 until 2022. In terms of the type of research, the analysis focused on texts presenting empirical studies on the phenomenon of begging and the individuals engaging in begging. The final selection criterion was the subject matter of the texts, which pertained to the description of begging and the individuals involved. Therefore, a total of four texts were included in the study: two monographs and two articles. The collected materials represented all available empirical studies on begging in Poland.

XENOPHOBIA AGAINST RROMA: AN INTRINSIC PART OF THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING DISCOURSE?

According to the international definition of the Trafficking Protocol, trafficking in human beings is the recruitment, transportation or receipt of a person, whereby the primary defining characteristic is not the type of activity of the trafficked person, but the type of recruitment: through the threat of violence, deception, abuse of authority or exploitation of a relationship of dependency. The aim is to exploit the person concerned (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004:2).

General Characteristics of Human Trafficking

In the relevant literature on human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in the European context, a significant presence of the Rroma ethnic group among trafficked persons and perpetrators has been articulated for years. The explanations for a high-risk potential are rarely based on empirical data. Rather, profiles of trafficked persons and perpetrators are repeated again

and again, which serve a static conception and fixation on ethnicity as well as the perpetrator-victim dichotomy inherent in it (Geisler, 2018:217).
The research on which this thematic axe of the article is based (Geisler, 2015) has shown that there is no single or determining factor that influences the trafficking of persons of Rroma ethnicity in Europe. Rather, there is a convergence of different influencing factors such as: Willingness to migrate and informal networks, lack of information regarding work and migration opportunities within the European Union, socio-economically precarious living conditions, segregation and social exclusion in central living conditions, ghettoisation, dysfunctional families and/or social networks, discrimination and disadvantage based on gender and/or ethnic characteristics, stigmatisation of sex work. Helma Lutz provides an important impetus for migration and women's studies as well, by bringing the gendering of migration, the employment of migrant women and a life in the so-called twilight zone into the discussion (Lutz, 2003). It is reasonable to assume that the factors influencing the extent to which people of Rroma ethnicity are affected by human trafficking are just as multifaceted as those affecting the majority population.
Research has also shown that there are specific regional and socio-structural influencing factors that affect people of Rroma ethnicity to a greater extent due to social exclusion, discrimination, as well as group-related enmity. For example, in relation to the overrepresentation of Rroma in state children's homes and the associated high risk of recruitment in human trafficking from state institutions in the form of the "loverboy" method (Geisler, 2018:222–226). Furthermore, an increased prevalence of risk factors was identified that expose people of Rroma ethnicity to a greater risk of human trafficking than people in the same social position, including unemployment, work in the low-wage sector or in precarious casual jobs, marginalisation on the housing market, in the education system and in healthcare (Patyi, 2023:69). Aspects that can contribute to a willingness to migrate. However, this form of migration is typically not the result of a freely chosen or emancipatory decision, but rather a response to intersecting structural constraints, including capitalist, gender-specific, ecological, and (neo)colonial dynamics, as well as experiences of discrimination and exclusion. The question today is, who would have preferred to stay in their cultural and socio-economic context if that had been a viable perspective (Lang, 2017:183). The decision to view trafficked persons either as autonomous creators of their own lives and, due to their willingness to migrate, also complicit, or as victims of the traffickers and/or the circumstances, must necessarily fail (Geisler 2015:107). It must fail because the binary opposition bypasses the lives of those affected due to its under-complexity. People move due to constraints and yet use their limited room for manoeuvre, have accepted a work offer abroad voluntarily before being trafficked and exploited or migrated involuntarily, or all at once (Prilutski 2018:239). The complex power and inequality relations in turn result in complex positions of the subjects — trafficked persons and human traffickers.

Anti-Rroma and Essentialist Attributions
However, the research also revealed that anti-Rroma and essentialist attributions continue to be reproduced unquestioningly in the human trafficking discourse:

- *Romnia*, i.e. female members of the ethnic group, are portrayed as victims of assumed patriarchal Rroma community structures (Geisler, 2018:218).
- The image of the Rroma corresponds to that of unscrupulous perpetrators who exploit Romnia in sex work and children and young people of the ethnic group through child labour, for example in the form of begging (Geisler, 2015:262).
- Migrants from the Rroma ethnic group are primarily viewed as large groups who have travelled abroad solely for the purpose of criminal activities (ibid.:266).

It is serving a static view of and fixation on ethnicity as well as the perpetrator-victim dichotomy and it touches social inclusion or exclusion, as well as belonging or *otherness*. The anti-Rroma

context in society as a whole and the construction of *Rroma* as the *threatening Other* (Karakayali, Heller 2022) is also included in the human trafficking discourse. Ultimately, it should not be forgotten that deeply rooted stereotypes against the Rroma ethnic group have lost hardly any of their power.

Ethnic categorisations are highly multi-layered and, in combination with social, political and economic developments, complex processes. The categorizations that prevail are shaped by these dynamics and embedded within the broader social context. Public perception tends to focus on individuals who conform to constructed representations—such as, in this case, the visibly identifiable Rroma (Attia, 2014).

With regard to the Rroma ethnic group, there are a wide range of differentiation possibilities, with each differentiation resulting in a spectrum of categorisations (Geisler, 2015:267–268). Rroma are stigmatised and singled out on the basis of constructed physical and/or ethnic characteristics. In a social context, it is primarily important that these characteristics are visible.

For people of the Rroma ethnic group, who are produced and reproduced in the human trafficking discourse, a one-sided categorisation as *others* takes place (Geisler, 2018:219). Meaning is constructed through opposites; this can take place through the attribution of a combination of socially negative characteristics. In the discourse on *otherness*, topics such as criminality take centre stage, but in order to further emphasise *otherness*, other supposedly typical characteristics are also strongly overemphasised and portrayed in a clichéd manner (Koch, 2010:258–262). Traditionally characterised Rroma communities and the associated social structures as well as family cohesion appear to represent the socially entrenched anti-Rroma attitudes in the human trafficking discourse in particular. Based on an assumed preservation of tradition, this creates a dichotomy between a supposedly patriarchal or pre-modern ethnic group and a supposedly progressive or feminist majority society using undifferentiated generalisations (Geisler, 2013:170).

Gabriele Dietze proposes the term ethnosexism here, understood as a kind of culturalisation of gender that judges ethnically marked people on the basis of alleged deficits in their backward *culture* from an assumed superior civilisation perspective (Dietze, 2016:4).

In particular, the recognisable characteristics of the preservation of tradition among *Ola'h, Vlach* and *Kalderash* Rroma are directly linked to criminal activities and human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation of *'their own women'* (Geisler, 2015:268). Interview excerpts with professional social workers in the field of counselling for trafficked persons in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania show this as an example.

- "I don't have any personal experience with the *Olah-Rroma*, but what I have heard that this better social situation is due to the fact that there are these criminal activities and the *Olah-Rroma* also show this to the outside world. They have thick gold chains and rings and bracelets, and they also like to show off their wealth or how well off they are." (Geisler, 2015:214).
- "The *Vlachiko Rroma* are very closed, they don't allow anybody enter even if you are Rroma. (…) And in the majority of the Rroma population, i.e. in the other group, it is often said that these *Olah-Rroma* sell their wives or daughters because it is an income for the family." (ibid.:213).
- "I think that's the way it is, this attitude has become ingrained. The *Olah-Rroma* are uhm, are seen in the sense that there is drug dealing there, that there is theft, so everything negative happens there. And the *Slovakian Rroma*, they also view this *Olah* group so negatively in general. And they don't really want to be in contact. Unfortunately, I don't know to what extent personal experience plays a role here." (ibid.:213).

An essentialist and static understanding of ethnicity, alongside the codification of an inherent perpetrator/victim dichotomy, presents significant analytical and ethical challenges. Within this framework, Rroma are often tolerated only within marginalised, lower-tier social positions. Attempts to transcend these positions, particularly through upward socioeconomic mobility, tend

to provoke stigmatizing responses. Affluent Rroma, in particular, frequently become targets of negative stereotyping and are delegitimized through associations with alleged criminal behaviour. In such cases, individuals identified as Rroma serve as projection surfaces for anti-Rroma prejudice and are instrumentalized within human trafficking discourses (Geisler, 2015:216–222).
This dynamic reveals processes of ethnicization within trafficking narratives—wherein individuals from a specific ethnic group are ascribed allegedly homogeneous traits that are linked to human trafficking. These constructed associations function to legitimize broader societal mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization.

Rroma and Human Trafficking — An Intersectional Perspective
Addressing human trafficking in the context of Rroma requires an intersectional approach, considering the interplay of gender, ethnicity, social class, and migration experiences. This perspective is crucial given the historical marginalization and discrimination faced by Rroma.
Rroma are often collectively stigmatized in trafficking discourses, based on prejudice and stereotypes that ignore underlying structural causes such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. Women are frequently portrayed as passive victims, while men are depicted as perpetrators, reinforcing oversimplified narratives that also fail to capture the complexity of trafficking dynamics. It is important to recognize the heterogeneity within the Roma ethnicity. Dominant narratives often neglect the structural and historical power dynamics that enable human trafficking as well.
Social work holds a distinct significance and responsibility in this context—not only by offering support services to trafficked individuals within the framework of state systems, but also by positioning itself as an expert authority on human trafficking and those affected by it. In doing so, it aligns with approaches associated with humanitarian government (Oeltjen, 2018:134). As such, social work is embedded within a broader discourse, contributing to and (re)producing specific representations and narratives.

SCIENTIFIC RACISM AND RACIALISATION IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON BEGGING

Today, many legal experts and researchers emphasize that laws prohibiting begging constitute a violation of human rights (Ramanathan, 2008; Ploszka, 2017; Memetovic, 2020). They argue that, given recent judicial decisions on begging, this way of earning a living should not be criminalized, and that one of the basic human rights is the ability to ask others for help (Memetovic, 2021). Begging is generally defined as publicly asking for money, food, or other goods with little or no reward in return (Snow, Anderson, 1993; Lankenau, 1999; Król, 2010; Memetovic, 2020).
Efforts to combat begging are a part of the activities of local governments and their subordinate social welfare centres in all major Polish cities. The responsibilities of social workers include diagnosing the problem of begging, monitoring and intervening, including professional activation, as well as collaborating with other entities involved in counteracting this phenomenon. Counteracting this phenomenon is assigned to the field of social work based on the provisions of assistance to people affected by poverty, unemployment and homelessness, which are related to begging (Ploszka, 2017:89).
This section provides a critical review of the state and quality of Polish empirical research on begging. Analysing the collected data, it became necessary to understand the construction of the scholarly image of begging to clarify the description of this phenomenon in the context of the Roma community. Therefore, one of the goals of this section is to analyse this issue from the perspective of situating begging in the context of race and skin colour.
In this text, the word "Roma" refers to a pan-European and supranational ethnic group. It should be emphasized that people of Roma origin belong to an ethnic minority, but this does not mean

they should be treated as a homogeneous group. There are many different types of Roma groups, differing in culture, religion, and language (Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, 2016).

Polish Empirical Research on the Phenomenon of Begging

The first analysed work on begging is a monograph edited by Stanisław Maruszewski and Andrzej Bukowski (1995), which presents the results of qualitative research conducted in 1993. The empirical material consisted of interviews with 35 begging individuals of Polish origin and street observations. The aim was to describe the phenomenon and reflect on it, with particular attention devoted to research ethics, discussed in the introduction and in a separate chapter addressing the dilemmas involved in interviewing people who beg and characterizing the studied group (Bukowski, 1995).

The next publication is Kazimiera Król's book (2010), aimed at diagnosing the problem of begging in contemporary Poland and indicating actions that social policy institutions could take to reduce this phenomenon. The author states that people asking for support earn between 3 and 12 euros per day (Król, 2010:67), although other studies citing this research report daily earnings of 47–117 euros (Fedorowicz, 2019). Begging is described as a social pathology leading to dependence on this form of activity, and the summary mentions a "syndrome of psychological susceptibility to begging" shaped by microsocial conditions. The constructed image of the phenomenon presents it as an individual choice and a form of lifestyle or occupation (Król, 2010:99–103).

The third analysed text is Dębski's article "Characteristics of the problem of begging in Gdańsk: based on hidden non-participant observation" (2013), whose findings were used to prepare a social diagnosis of begging by the local social welfare centre, the Police and the Municipal Guard. The aim was to identify the specificity of begging in Gdańsk and to challenge stereotypes associated with it. Covert observation was used to avoid the need for participant consent. Based on skin colour and language, the researchers determined that 54% of the observed individuals were of Polish origin, while 42% were of Rroma origin (Dębski, 2013:112).

The last discussed study is Katarzyna Makaruk's research for the "We Give Children Strength" foundation (2015) on child begging. The article "Child Begging in Poland" summarizes activities conducted under the project "The Third Sector Against Forced Begging." The aim was to describe the problem of child begging in Poland and to characterize the children involved in terms of their living conditions and the forms of begging they engaged in (Makaruk, 2015:116). Covert, non-participant observation was again used. Through this method, the authors identified the ethnic origin of 37 darker-skinned children as Rroma (nationality not established) and determined the nationality of 24 lighter-skinned children as Polish (Makaruk, 2015:117–118).

Racialization of Begging — Analysis of Polish Research on Begging

In research on begging, the notion of **racialization** refers to a mechanism that legitimizes the position of individuals engaged in begging. The adequacy of the description of the studied groups is essentialized in advance and attributed to categories such as race, language, skin colour, nationality, criminality, professionalization, or social pathologies. These categories are used to indicate the supposed reasons and justifications for undertaking begging. This mechanism presents the position and activities of the described groups as a matter of choice or lifestyle, resulting from maladjustment or a particular mentality. Examples of such narratives include terms like "psychological susceptibility to begging," "a tendency toward a specific, disorderly way of life," or "unwillingness to take legal employment." The mechanism of racialization does not require the concept of race—although it does not exclude it—and may rely on other forms of categorizing and hierarchizing the studied groups.

In the case of identifying ethnicity, biological racism may take the form of an extremely deterministic and essentialist understanding of culture, for example by defining ethnic identity through language (Bobako, 2017:158). An example is research conducted in Gdańsk, where the

Rroma were distinguished from the white race based on their lack of knowledge of Polish and English (Dębski, 2013:112). Contemporary studies on racism highlight that the invention of races was closely tied to 18th- and 19th-century linguistic research combined with racial categories (Bobako, 2017:153). These studies aimed, among other things, to link linguistic groups with the Aryan and Semitic races, providing a scientific justification for anti-Semitism (Anidjar, 2007). Research at that time also sought a common origin of the Rroma through linguistic analyses. By the late 19th century, studies on racial development and hierarchy, supported by claims about the linguistic purity of the Rroma, assigned their origins to the lowest Indian castes and rejected earlier hypotheses about their ties to Europeans. As a result, the Rroma were considered a mixed race responsible for the degeneration of European racial purity (Asséo, 1994:69). Referring to the studies on begging conducted in Gdańsk (2013) and Warsaw (2015), which used categories of race, skin colour and language to identify the Rroma, it becomes clear that this approach erases the group's internal cultural diversity — including national, religious and linguistic differences. Such homogenization aggregates other significant distinctions, creating internal divisions that become irrelevant once pathological traits or criminal behaviours are attributed to the community. This was visible in research on children's begging, where the criminal nature of the activity was associated with Rroma culture, while for Polish children it was attributed to parental consent (Makaruk, 2015:131).

It is also worth noting the role of references to biological discourse. This is emblematic of cultural racism, which, when describing groups involved in social phenomena, often adopts biological language and medical terminology. The shift in explaining the causes of begging toward the medical category of a "psychological susceptibility syndrome to begging" (Król, 2010:92) clarifies why the author reconstructs the concept of social pathology to include mental illnesses. The terms used to describe begging allow its participants to be portrayed as marked by social degeneration requiring strict control and supervision. Begging thus becomes not only a pathological phenomenon and a disease entity, but also a biological threat capable of infecting those susceptible to it (Król, 2010:79). Racialization is linked to the individualization of material needs and their reduction to the biological maladjustment of the individual.

Theory and Concept of Describing Begging and the Figure of a "Beggar"

The research discussed here can be described as an essentialist-cultural approach. Its explanatory framework positions people engaged in begging as objects of exclusion and stigmatization, and in extreme cases of anti-Rroma bias and racism. The methodology of this approach either omits or instrumentally uses the voices of those being described — reflecting a colonial mode of constructing the political presence of the groups under study. Consequently, one of the methods employed is covert non-participant observation. From a postcolonial perspective, ignoring the voices of the excluded reproduces relations of power and agency (Fiałkowska et al., 2018:7). In this framework, the perspectives of research subjects are not considered; they do not participate in the research but become its unaware objects.

The outline of the theory of begging emerging from the essentialist-cultural approach consists of several elements. First, begging is presented as a lifestyle and an individual choice. Second, it is portrayed as an easy and profitable way to earn relatively high monthly incomes, from EUR 1,500 to EUR 3,500. Third, it appears as a professionalized activity, with specific roles and strategies aimed at maximizing income. Fourth, it is framed as a form of fraud, linked to organized crime and social pathologies. Taken together, these features offer an explanation for why people who beg allegedly refuse assistance from the social welfare system: those earning incomes supposedly exceeding the national average in Poland would have no interest in institutional help. Kazimiera Król attributes such refusal to alcohol and drug addiction, homelessness, and the choice of begging as a lifestyle (Król, 2010:77–79). Niedzwiecki, in turn, explains it through changes within the individual caused by poverty, isolation, and various forms of alienation tied to the social system (Niedźwiecki,

1995:109). Within these assumptions, the poverty of beggars becomes merely a mask concealing a supposed flow of financial resources. Recognizing the contradictions within this framework, herein it is termed "the concept of the happy beggar."

When we look more closely at the concept of the happy beggar, it becomes clear that it is constructed externally and serves the aims of social policy. Its similarity to the process of creating a scapegoat figure, well known from racist discourses, is therefore not accidental. According to Peter Glick, a key element in constructing the ideological model of a scapegoat is the belief—held by members of one community about another group—that this group possesses disproportionate, dishonestly acquired resources hidden from the public, as well as skills such as cunning and slyness that pose a threat to others. Hostile prejudices function independently of actual conditions, often even counterfactually. What matters is that the group cast as the scapegoat is perceived as having bad intentions and as endangering public order. Another necessary factor is the presence of shared social frustrations, usually accompanied by pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices (Glick, 2009). Hostility toward the scapegoat may take various forms, including symbolic exclusion embedded in everyday practices. This is supported by justifications portraying the targeted group as guilty and responsible for its situation. The person who begs thus becomes both victim and perpetrator of their own circumstances. It is also important that this mechanism includes two dimensions: aesthetic and instrumental. The "beggar" is depicted as dirty, smelly, and tainted, yet simultaneously cunning and seasoned in their craft.

SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Base

Böhnisch's (2017) concept of *Lebensbewältigung* (life management) positions the search for subjective agency under conditions of threatened psychosocial equilibrium at the centre of social work. The present study shows how the victim–perpetrator binary deprives Rroma of recognised agency and pathologizes coping strategies, instead of analysing the socio-structural context that endangers self-worth, social recognition, and self-efficacy. Interpreting begging or vulnerability to sexual exploitation as *situated strategies of life management* rather than as cultural deviance aligns directly with Böhnisch's distinction between structural "release" (*Freisetzung*) and subjective capacity to act (*Handlungsfähigkeit*). Lifeworld-oriented social work demands a "double vision" of everyday life as both structurally conditioned and idiosyncratically organised (Thiersch, Grunwald, Köngeter, 2012). This perspective requires casework to reconstruct temporal, spatial, and relational orders while simultaneously analysing the socio-political forces that shape them. The study's critique of essentialist ethnic explanations and covert observational methods underlines the need for phenomenologically dense, non-racialising reconstructions of lifeworlds that replace suspicion with dialogue. Früchtel, Cyprian and Budde (2013) expand this lifeworld lens into a spatial-structural heuristic by proposing five principles of social space orientation and the SONI model (social structure, organisation, network, individual). The present study illustrates how securitising policies and standardised procedural logics "colonise" lifeworlds — an outcome these authors explicitly warn against. The documented absence of Rroma voices, both in anti-trafficking governance and in research settings, highlights the necessity of participatory and co-produced approaches that fulfil empowerment's reflexive and transitive dimensions (Herriger, 2014). Muckenfuss (2020), drawing on Staub-Bernasconi, articulates the "third mandate" of human-rights-oriented social work: scientifically grounded explanations of social problems and an explicit ethical obligation to human rights and social justice. The study's evidence that ethnicized stereotypes legitimise current practices makes the third mandate operationally relevant: social workers are professionally obliged to challenge policies that criminalize survival strategies and to advocate for rights-consistent alternatives (e.g., decriminalization of begging, anti-racist safeguards in anti-trafficking systems). Finally, Lutz (2020) stresses the necessity of a critical, reflexive, and dialogical professional ethos, informed by Freire's pedagogy of liberation and Foucault's critique of power/knowledge. Since

our analysis shows that "expert knowledge" about Rroma often legitimises exclusion, a reflexive stance—questioning the truth effects of professional categories such as "risk profile" or "organised begging"—is not optional but constitutive of ethical practice.

Practice Implications

In practice, assessment models must shift from ethnicity as an explanatory variable to structurally informed, intersectional diagnostics that foreground housing exclusion, debt, gendered care work, migration status, precarious labour, and institutional racism (Crenshaw, 1991). The figure of the "happy beggar" and the rigid victim/perpetrator binary discussed in the present study demonstrate how culturalized explanations obscure these structural determinants. Participatory pathways with Rroma communities should be developed through peer outreach, neighbourhood drop-ins, legal and labour counselling, childcare infrastructure, and mobility support. In anti-trafficking work, survivor advisory boards and peer advocates should be embedded in case planning and evaluation processes. This meets Herriger's (2014) criteria for transitive empowerment and directly addresses the absence of agency highlighted in the empirical findings. Social-space-oriented intervention involves changes at multiple levels: at the *structural* level, advocating for the decriminalisation of begging and the protection of access to sanitation, shelter, and public space; at the *organisational* level, rewriting protocols that make police reporting the default course of action and integrating anti-racism checks into decision-making; at the *network* level, building alliances among Rroma groups, tenants' unions, schools, health services and migrant self-organisations; and at the *individual* level, designing strength-based plans that balance immediate safety and income with long-term education and employment trajectories (Früchtel et al., 2013). Lifeworld-oriented practice requires sustained presence in the neighbourhood, stabilisation of daily routines, and identity work that counters internalised stigma (Thiersch et al., 2012; Böhnisch, 2017). This is especially relevant given research showing that institutional overrepresentation of Rroma correlates with increased exposure to recruitment for exploitation (Geisler, 2018). A human-rights mandate further obliges social workers to act as advocates against discriminatory policing, residence restrictions, and exclusion from welfare, education, and health care, and to support residence and compensation rights for trafficked persons irrespective of cooperation with law enforcement (Muckenfuss, 2020). Finally, Freire-inspired dialogical team development—problem-posing education, thematic investigations, and collective reflection—can counter the epistemic objectification of Rroma and institutionalise co-production (Lutz, 2020).

DISCUSSION — THE NEED FOR A DECOLONIZING AND ANTI-RACIST APPROACH TOWARDS BEGGING AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Even though the Rroma have been part of Europe for centuries, it has been believed that they constitute a culturally different social group (Chang, Rucker-Chang, 2020). It is estimated that around 10–12 million Rroma live in the countries of the European Union. According to international reports on human rights, the Rroma are the most discriminated ethnic minority in Europe. Among all groups surveyed by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), Rroma achieves the highest rates of discrimination (FRA, 2016). Systematic marginalization pervades multiple aspects of Rroma lives, from education and housing to healthcare and labour market participation. Structural exclusion, as Geisler (2015) and the FRA (2018) highlight, increases vulnerability to exploitation and human trafficking. Such marginalization is not merely incidental but is deeply entrenched within social systems that systematically exclude Rroma individuals from opportunities for upward mobility and security (Memetovic, 2020).

The history of silencing and obliterating the voices of Rroma communities in research relates to the colonial practices that have also occurred in Europe, as not only is the territory colonized, but also

the people and their subjective statements become subject to colonization (Ashton-Smith, 2010). The scholarly and discursive practices discussed in this article are in many respects reminiscent of Edward Said's (2018) concept of "Orientalism". A characteristic feature of this type of approach is the use of explanations and concepts that are exo-ethnonyms—concepts not used by the groups it describes but created by individuals outside these groups. Therefore, the analyses presented here point to the need for research in which the Rroma community is an active participant. Geisler (2021) and Tuhiwai Smith (1999) advocate a paradigm shift toward participatory and decolonial methodologies that focus on the voices of the marginalized. Recognizing Rroma as active subjects with agency and resilience is crucial to debunking objectifying narratives and supporting more relevant and empowering representations in academic and policy contexts. An intersectional approach, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), is essential for understanding the multilayered vulnerabilities faced by Rroma individuals. Ethnicity, gender, class, and migration status intersect to create specific and compounded forms of discrimination and exclusion (Friberg, 2020). The main challenge in examining the adaptation strategies of Rroma communities towards migration, begging and human trafficking is to diagnose a situation marked by Anti-Rroma bias, poverty and exclusion, while recognizing limited agency or the ability to decide about one's own life (Brazzabeni et al., 2015). In the context of the conclusions presented in the analysis of begging and the discourse on human trafficking, we see the need to create a theory that avoids racist and essentializing stereotypes. Therefore, we currently need a decolonizing and structural approach to the phenomenon of begging and human trafficking in the context of migrant Rroma communities. Such decolonizing studies are conducted on a large scale in the research stream known as Critical Rromani Studies, which focuses on describing the processes of racialization, criticizing and referring to the concept of human rights, and describing the phenomenon of Anti-Rroma bias and silencing the voice of the Rroma community (Yuval-Davis et al., 2017; Fiałkowska et al., 2018). Critical race theory (CRT), which emerged from legal studies, and which emphasizes that the analysis of social phenomena cannot be conducted historically but should be related to the contexts in which they occur, can be helpful in the analysis of the social construction of begging and human trafficking (Möschel, 2017).

The persistence of racial stereotypes in debates on begging and human trafficking reveals continuity with earlier frameworks of scientific racism. What has changed is viewed by many contemporary critics of racism as a cosmetic reform that has disguised issues such as skin colour and race within the categories of culture, ethnicity, and nation (Bobako, 2017; Möschel, 2017; Mbembe, 2018). In American begging studies, some scholars have highlighted how gender and ethnicity influence these practices (Snow, Anderson, 1993; Lankenau, 1999; Lee, Farrell, 2003). Some studies show that begging can negatively impact minority groups, reinforcing stereotypes of whites who perceive blacks as lazy, lacking ambition, and lacking in hard work (Rosenfield et al., 1982). The same mechanisms and stereotypes apply to Rroma, whose begging is perceived as a typical cultural trait (Ruggiu, 2016). Stereotypes about human trafficking, portraying Rroma as inherently criminal, patriarchal, or socially dysfunctional, are often reframed in culturalist discourses (Goldberg, 1993). The narratives of human trafficking and begging analysed in this article often pathologize Rroma communities or portraying them as inherently deviant. This construction, criticized by van Baar (2011), deflects attention from the structural causes of vulnerability and instead criminalizes poverty, social exclusion, and survival strategies. A key element of these discourses is the relationship between crime and begging, as well as human trafficking. For example, begging, as part of a system of gradations of social utility, is situated between legal work and crime, marking a transitional space between these spheres. It is within this understanding of social policy that the state utilizes social work to curtail and control begging. Geisler (2015), however, notes with respect to human trafficking that portraying Rroma men as exploiters and Rroma women and children as passive victims reinforces racialized notions of pathology, simplifying complex social realities into easily digestible but deeply misleading binaries. The heuristics employed in essentializing

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approaches to research on begging and human trafficking allow for the introduction of simple dichotomies, such as perpetrator versus victim, Rroma minority versus majority population, and men versus women, which are intended to justify the implementation of repressive and control practices against this minority in social policy. As emphasized by Andrijasevic (2010), migration and the informal economy often blur the line between victimization and agency.

Narratives depicting Rroma communities as inherently inferior or criminal legitimize structural inequalities by shifting responsibility from systemic injustice to individual guilt (Fassin, 2011). As Geisler (2015) shows, these representations absolve social institutions from addressing the root causes of marginalization, reinforcing exclusion under the guise of cultural or moral deficiency. The discourses discussed here illustrate how the convergence of knowledge production on begging and the exercise of power through human trafficking data enables resettlement policies that merely displace poverty across borders rather than addressing the conditions of survival faced by Rroma communities. By ignoring sociopolitical solutions to poverty, racism, and discrimination, such policies violate fundamental rights and rely on criminalization and restrictive migration controls that cannot resolve structural injustice.

CONCLUSION

The article demonstrates that contemporary discourses on begging and human trafficking contribute to the ongoing marginalization of Rroma communities. Two dominant narrative patterns emerge: the "happy beggar" theory, which shapes public perceptions of requests for assistance, and the dichotomous construction of victims and perpetrators in discourses on human trafficking. These interpretive frameworks tend to attribute begging and trafficking to ethnic characteristics rather than to structural and systemic inequalities.

The findings indicate a need for decolonizing approaches within social work that acknowledge Roma agency and view practices such as begging and migration as context-dependent strategies rather than as cultural deficits. Social work practice should incorporate global and structural perspectives while attending to the everyday relational dynamics that influence clients' lives. Ethnic essentialist explanations are to be replaced by dialogical, phenomenologically informed approaches that avoid processes of racialization. Participatory and co-creative methods that centre Rroma perspectives, combined with a human-rights-oriented mandate, require practitioners to critically examine policies that criminalize survival strategies. A reflective professional ethos is essential to prevent expert knowledge from reinforcing mechanisms of exclusion.

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Shared Power through Co-production and Easy-to-read (Preliminary Findings from Inclusive Research)[1]

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Abstract

OBJECTIVES: This article presents early findings from a participatory study in Slovakia, where Easy-to-read standards were co-produced with people with intellectual disabilities within social services quality standard 1.5 (Individual Planning). It focuses on the co-production process and participants' experiences of shared power and research roles, rather than evaluating the final Easy-to-read text. THEORETICAL BASE: The study is situated within inclusive research traditions

[1] The research is part of main author Lucia Cangarova's PhD studies.

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and universal design principles, drawing on the social model of disability and emphasising removal of environmental and communicative barriers. METHODS: A qualitative approach, informed by phenomenology and hermeneutics and structured through grounded theory, generated data across fifteen co-production sessions with two focus groups (N=11). Participants developed Easy-to-read versions of quality standard 1.5 (Individual Planning) through semi-structured discussions; sessions were video-recorded and transcripts analysed using iterative coding. OUTCOMES: Analysis highlighted four themes: (1) simplifying complex texts, (2) using tools and visual supports, (3) fostering collaboration and communication, and (4) evaluation and research identity. Participants valued involvement but noted challenges regarding time demands and communication. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: Co-production can strengthen accessibility by foregrounding diverse perspectives, provided there is skilled facilitation and support. For social workers, this implies flexible approaches and peer-support structures to sustain collaborative knowledge-building.

Keywords
easy-to-read, co-production, inclusive research, universal design, intellectual disability, participatory methods

INTRODUCTION

In daily life, we encounter complex social structures and unequal access to essential information. Ensuring information accessibility for all, including people with disabilities, is therefore a fundamental right and forms the focus of this study. According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to seek, receive and share information and ideas by any means of communication (United Nation, 2013). Ensuring information accessibility for all, including people with disabilities, is therefore a fundamental right and forms the focus of this study. In Slovakia, the right to accessible information regarding social services is ensured by the Social Services Act No. 448/2008. Our research investigates how the Easy-to-read version of quality standard 1.5 (Individual Planning) can help fulfil this requirement. We present preliminary findings from a participatory study exploring the process and conditions of co-producing comprehensible Easy-to-read texts with citizens with intellectual disabilities in Slovakia, focusing on their experiences as co-researchers. The European disability strategy "Union of Equality: Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030" is itself in an easy-to-read format and aims to improve the availability of clear information, yet little research, including in Slovakia, has examined this area.
The discussion draws preliminary findings from an ongoing participatory PhD study. We aim to explore how to co-produce an Easy-to-read version of the social services quality standard with individuals with intellectual disabilities in Slovakia. We chose Individual Planning because our co-researchers identified it as a key quality standard relevant to their everyday decisions and support in social services. Our contribution is twofold: (i) to highlight participants' experiences of what makes co-production feel empowering and safe, and (ii) to extract practical insights for social work organisations aiming to incorporate accessible communication.

Information Accessibility

The right to access information applies to all individuals, including people with disabilities. The origins of Easy-to-read texts lies in Germany and Scandinavian countries in the 1960s and 1970s, and the idea subsequently spread across Europe, becoming established in many countries as a tool for accessible information. One of the earliest significant easy-to-read documents was the UK government's 2001 report "*Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century*", and Easy-to-read information is now widely expected in EU member states.

Both the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Slovak Law 448/2008 on social services set out requirements for accessibility, with particular emphasis on universal design. Accessibility, understood as a qualitative concept, is framed differently across design traditions, professional disciplines, cultural contexts, and stakeholder groups. It's a principle that aims to ensure products, environments, and services are adaptable and usable by the widest possible range of users, including those with disabilities (Rollová, Čerešňová, 2015). This concept extends beyond physical products and environments to digital and interactive systems (Persson et al., 2015; Scourfield, 2021). According to Iwarsson and Ståhl, accessibility represents the relationship between a person's functional capacity and barriers to physical access to the physical environment (Iwarsson, Ståhl, 2003).

The concept of 'universal design' was first introduced by Ronald L. Mace in 1985. It has also been referred to as "*design for accessibility*," "*design for all*," "*transgenerational design*," and "*inclusive design*." In Europe, the term "*Design for All*" is commonly used and is rooted in Scandinavian functionalism and ergonomic design. Its development was shaped by social changes in Sweden, Norway and Denmark between the 1960s and 1990s. In the United Kingdom, "*inclusive design*" is the preferred term (EIDD-Design for All Europe, 2004). Although terminology and norms vary, the underlying ethical principles remain broadly consistent across countries and regions.

The philosophy and principles of universal design are linked to the current understanding of disability as a social construct. This perspective aligns with a social and human rights approach to disability.

The last decades have seen a shift towards recognising disability not as an individual deficit but because of environmental barriers. This shift mirrors socio-ecological theories in social work and serves as the foundational premise of universal design. As a result, universal design moves beyond individual and specific accommodations to prioritise environments, products, and services that are accessible and beneficial to all.

Viewing disability as a social construct provides a useful framework for interpreting accessibility and its significance in modern society (Degener, 2016; 2017). From this perspective, disability is not an individual condition, but a product of social construction. Social constructivist theories argue that language, culture, ideology, and social norms shape how we perceive the world and reality. Applied to accessibility, this implies that notions of what counts as "*normal*" or "*abnormal*" are socially constructed. As a result, this can lead to the marginalisation and discrimination of people with disabilities.

Easy-To-Read and Plain Language as Part of Information Accessibility

Lindholm and Vanhatalo emphasise that modern society is fundamentally structured through language, encompassing legislation, values, norms, trade, religion, education, science and politics. Unlike in the past, the current view emphasises that all people, despite their limitations, have the same right to information, inclusion, and participation in everyday life in society. According to recent PIAAC results, between 4.9% and 27.7% of adults in participating OECD countries have only the lowest level of literacy, highlighting the need for accessible language, particularly in interactions with authorities (Lindholm, Vanhatalo, 2021).

The development of Easy-to-read and plain language reflects sustained attempts to improve the accessibility and clarity of information for diverse audiences. Although the two concepts overlap, they have distinct histories and intended audiences. The origins of Easy-to-read are closely connected to the People First disability rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The concept of Easy-to-read was born out of the necessity to provide reading and information access for people with disabilities, particularly those with cognitive limitations (primarily intellectual disabilities). Its roots can be traced back to Scandinavia and Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, where specially adapted texts began to be developed for individuals who needed a simpler language form to understand the content effectively.

Whereas Easy-to-read was designed mainly for people with disabilities, plain language developed as a broader movement to make communication clearer for the general population. It originated in legal and governmental texts, where technical jargon and complexity often obstructed understanding. In the United States, plain language gained momentum in the 1970s as part of efforts to improve public communication by government institutions. An important development was the 2010 Plain Writing Act, which required federal agencies to use plain language in their public communications (Hasselkus, 2010).

Easy-to-read is a writing approach intended to make information accessible to individuals with reading difficulties. This group includes people with disabilities, cognitive impairments, older adults, individuals with limited literacy, and people learning a second language. Easy-to-read materials employ simple vocabulary, short sentences and clear structures, often supplemented with visual aids such as pictures or symbols. The aim is to support readers' comprehension, thereby enhancing independence and access to information (Easy Read, 2023).

Plain language refers to writing that is clear, direct, and accessible to a broad readership. Its purpose is to reduce misunderstandings and to improve communication between writers and readers. It avoids technical terminology, long sentences, and complex grammatical forms. This approach is often used in legal, government, and business documents, where the information must be understandable to everyone (the majority of the target population), regardless of their prior knowledge or education in the field (Eagleson et al., 1991).

The main difference between the two approaches lies in their target audience and purpose: Easy-to-read is tailored for readers with specific limitations, whereas plain language seeks to reach a broader public.

From Participation to Co-Production

In the past, people with intellectual disabilities were typically positioned as research subjects rather than as active contributors to knowledge creation. (Harris et al., 2024).

Inclusive qualitative research recognises people with disabilities as "*experts by experience*" (Nind, 2014). This perspective describes participants as equal contributors rather than "*subjects*". Their lived experience is not just a complement to professional perspectives, but often a correction. Following the tradition of inclusive research developed by Walmsley and Johnson (2003) and later expanded by Walmsley, Strnadová et al. (2018), we treat participants as equal contributors (Walmsley, Johnson, 2003; Walmsley et al., 2018). We treat their lived experiences as a unique form of expertise that holds interpretive weight within the research process.

Excluding people with disabilities as experts is particularly problematic when developing Easy-to-read materials, which are specifically aimed at improving accessibility and understanding for them. The traditional approach of creating materials "*for*" people with intellectual disabilities, instead of "*with*" them, raises important questions about the relevance, effectiveness, and empowerment of these resources.

Easy-to-read materials are an important accessibility tool, using simplified language, clear structures and visual supports to aid comprehension (Chinn, Homeyard, 2017). However, little is known about how far people with disabilities are meaningfully involved in developing, evaluating and refining such materials. This gap is significant given the compelling evidence that user involvement in design processes is not just beneficial, but essential for more effective and acceptable outcomes (Sitbon et al., 2020).

Participatory research approaches and coproduction methodologies, hold great promise for meaningful engagement. By emphasising shared power, collaborative decision-making and the recognition of experiential expertise, these approaches strengthen the foundations for accessibility (Payne et al., 2021; Scourfield, 2021). Applying these approaches to the development of Easy-to-read materials demands close attention to accessibility, communication supports and the structural barriers that can hinder full participation.

The concept of coproduction is transformative, extending beyond consultation to encompass shared responsibility for research design, implementation, and dissemination (Parent-Johnson, Duncan, 2024). In the context of Easy-to-read materials, coproduction might involve people with intellectual disabilities as co-designers, co-evaluators, and co-disseminators, fundamentally shifting power dynamics and enhancing the relevance of outputs. This transformative potential invites new ways of working.

These choices collectively steer the work towards co-production. People with disabilities are central in identifying knowledge gaps, shaping processes, and evaluating outcomes. Our co-production is specifically focused on co-producing Easy-to-read materials (quality standards from Slovak legislation). This not only helps in making the relationships between researchers and participants visible, but also as part of the knowledge produced. This positioning of the project on the co-production end of the participation spectrum aligns the analytic practice with the accessibility aims of the study. Understanding these elements is crucial for both participatory research with individuals with intellectual disabilities and the development of effective, user-centred educational and training resources. The focus on user-centred Easy-to-read materials underscores the tangible outcomes of the co-production approach.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Orientation of Research

A qualitative research design was adopted, informed by two philosophical perspectives: phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology seeks to understand how people perceive and experience the world around them. Rather than describing reality as separate from theoretical assumptions and categories, phenomenology explores how phenomena shape human experience and acquire meaning in social interaction. A central principle is the effort to set aside preconceptions, so that the analysis remains open to participants lived experience. Phenomenology seeks to capture meanings that resonate with human experience (van Manen, 2014). It is a reminder that "*experience*" is much more than sensory perceptions and facts. In this context, the research subject is formed by the interaction between a person and their situation, rather than being a solitary individual assigned presumed patterns of behaviour.

Hermeneutics is understood not only as a method but as a general theory of understanding. Understanding assumes that we already have some prior knowledge. In other words, all understanding is historically conditioned. We perceive ourselves and the world through an inherited horizon of understanding. Each of us has our own perspective, *our preconceptions*, that shape what we can discover about a phenomenon. Yet this pre-understanding is only partially accessible to reflection and cannot be fully articulated. Gadamer (2013) highlights that in our process of understanding and interpretation, we should allow "*the case itself*" to present itself based on its own ideas as much as possible. In this context, "*the case itself*" denotes the phenomenon under study. Its disclosure depends on intuition, interpretive insight, and, crucially, awareness of our own biases. Therefore, a primary hermeneutic challenge is to confront one's own prejudices and pre-understandings (Gadamer, 2013).

In qualitative inclusive (participatory) research, people with disabilities are experts in each situation based on their own experience — an "*expert by experience*" (Nind, 2014). They are equal to researchers not based on academic knowledge, but precisely because they can bring authenticity based on their own experience of the situation. In this context, the analysis of narrative data becomes crucial. According to Sørly (2024) and Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2013), narrativity is represented by stories about everyday life and personal life stories, and based on these, the role of the so-called "*experience-centred narrative researcher*" is formed among the group participants. This approach views narratives as meaningful and sequential accounts rooted in human experience. They represent and reconstruct experiences, express them, and illustrate changes in those experiences (Andrews et al., 2013; Sørly, 2024).

The active participation of persons with disabilities themselves is an important aspect of research, with the potential to transform the validity of the outputs and their subsequent translation into practical life. This approach aims to ensure and obtain better quality and more accurate knowledge and results. In the field of disability, this concerns how disability is perceived and experienced, what can be helpful, and how appropriate targeted support can be created. People with disabilities may contribute to research in multiple ways, such as identifying knowledge gaps and offering perspectives on how studies should be designed and carried out.
These theoretical frameworks directly influence the methodology of the research. They support the use of a qualitative approach, where the participant is a co-author of knowledge. Inclusive (participatory) research goes beyond analysing reality to contribute to its co-creation, with the capacity to influence the lives of people with intellectual disabilities.
The research aimed to explore the possibilities and process of co-production of Easy-to-read texts with the active co-production of people with intellectual disabilities. In this article and research process, we also provide insight into the relationships between the researcher and participants during the research process.

Settings
The study was conducted in co-production with eleven people with intellectual disability (*N=11)*, who are users of a single social services provider that provides daily (ambulant/outpatient) and residential services. This context is key to our focus on providing accessible information in social services and aligns with the human rights-based and universal design principles that inform our work.

Research Methods
Grounded Theory
In this study, we used an inductive approach to examine the social phenomena under investigation. The preliminary findings are presented in language intended to be accessible, inclusive, and easy to read. We focus on how co-researchers described, negotiated, and enacted the co-production of the Easy-to-read standard, rather than assessing the linguistic quality of the final document.
The inductive approach in research is a process in which the researcher begins without prior theories or hypotheses and instead attempts to derive a theory directly from the observed data. This approach is often described as "from the specific to the general", where the researcher looks for patterns and trends in individual cases or situations that could indicate broader conclusions (Skilbrei, 2023). One of the basic methods of the inductive approach is grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Strauss, Corbin, 1990), which we use in our research, valuing the input of all participants. Guided by grounded theory, we conducted open coding of Whisper transcripts from co-production work and focus-group discussions, progressed to focused/axial coding, and applied constant comparison within and across groups and across successive iterations of the Easy-to-read drafts.

Sampling
We used theoretical sampling to follow emergent ideas and to include varied disability experiences relevant to Easy-to-read. Sampling decisions were shaped by participants' priorities and contexts, ensuring that the inquiry remained grounded in lived experience. In grounded theory, theoretical sampling directs attention to the specific experiences, contexts, and perspectives of people with disabilities. Such an approach keeps research responsive to participants' needs and interests, enhancing both its relevance and inclusiveness (Suri, 2014). Grounded theory offers tools for in-depth analysis of the personal stories, experiences and interactions of people with disabilities. It supports recognition and analysis of complex social, cultural, and individual factors shaping their lives.

Grounded theory aims to build explanations that are directly derived from participants' data. In research involving people with disabilities, this means creating theories that reflect their realities, highlight their voices, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities for a more inclusive society (Nind, 2014; Suri, 2014; O'Brien, 2023). Grounded theory provides a flexible framework for inclusive research that acknowledges and foregrounds the perspectives of people with disabilities.

Data Generation

We collaborated with two ongoing co-production focus groups of adults with intellectual disabilities. These groups met for fifteen sessions in which we combined (a) collaborative production and revision of drafts for our Easy-to-read project — *Quality standard 1.5 on Individual planning*, (which co-researchers selected by themselves) and (b) semi-structured conversations focusing on the participants' experiences with accessible information and their involvement in research.

Each session began with the Easy-to-read agenda and ground rules, followed by a review of previous drafts. Researcher and co-researchers collaborated on wording, layout and examples, agreeing revisions before moving into broader discussion. This format reflected our narrative orientation, viewing stories as sequential accounts that both represent and reinterpret experience. It also positioned co-researchers as experts with interpretive authority in the room (Andrews et al., 2013; Nind, 2014; Sørly, 2024).

All sessions were video recorded (with consent) and transcribed using *Whisper transcription application*. The resulting transcripts provided the main data for analysis. Accessibility was embedded rather than appended: information for participation was prepared in clear, comprehensible forms; activities were paced with breaks and visual scaffolds, reflecting the study's universal-design and rights-based rationale for accessible communication. This approach enabled the meaningful inclusion of all participants in the research process. In practice, the evolving Easy-to-read drafts functioned as shared objects that anchored collective sense-making and enabled participants to exercise editorial control over the text.

Analysis

Guided by grounded theory, we conducted open coding of the Whisper transcripts from our co-production work and focus-group discussions. We paid close attention to detail and then moved on to focused or axial coding to establish relationships between categories. We also employed constant comparison within and across the two groups, as well as across successive iterations of the Easy-to-read drafts. Comparisons were made between Group A and Group B, between early and later sessions, and between discussions held before and after revisions. We wrote analytic memos to document category development and shifts in understanding and returned to the video when necessary to check context (overlapping speech, emphasis). This inductive procedure resonates with our phenomenological attention to lived experience and hermeneutic reflexivity regarding pre-understandings and aligns with classic grounded theory guidance (Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Strauss, Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1998; 2001).

Rigour and Reflexivity

Reflexivity is key to ensuring validity because it helps identify and address potential biases and ensures that research is conducted according to ethical and inclusive principles (Nind, 2014). It is especially important in grounded theory, particularly when working with people with disabilities. Researchers are expected to reflect critically on their own assumptions, attitudes, and potential biases, so that their work remains responsive to the needs, rights and preferences of participants. Reflexivity also helps to recognise and address power imbalances between researchers and participants.

We recognised that being reflexive about our pre-understandings (or hermeneutic horizon) and acknowledging the power imbalances between researchers and participants were essential

to ensuring validity in our inclusive grounded theory design. We documented our facilitation choices—such as pacing, turn-taking, and how we managed disagreements—and maintained a reflexive record of how our questions and interpretations might influence what could be discussed during co-production encounters (Gadamer, 2013; Nind, 2014). Before analysis, transcripts were pseudonymized, and video and text files were stored in line with required data security protocols. This demonstrated our commitment to ethical conduct in research.

Researcher Positionality

Our professional experiences in social work and disability services influenced the way we framed questions and facilitated discussions. We approached reflexivity as an ongoing process, consistently documenting how our assumptions shaped what could be expressed in the room. Additionally, we noted how participant feedback guided and redirected our focus.

Limitations

The study involved two groups from a single provider, which may constrain the transferability of the findings. Co-production was time-intensive; although Whisper facilitated efficient transcription, overlapping speech sometimes required video review for clarity. Nonetheless, collaborative engagement and methods aligned with accessibility aims mitigated these challenges.

Participants and Ethics

The study involved two mixed-gender focus groups of adults with intellectual disabilities. Group A (n=5) included participants with higher support needs. Group B (n=6) included participants with lower support needs. In total (N=11) participants (aged 25–65) took part in the study, contributing experiences that informed both the process and the outcomes.

Participants had variable levels of literacy. One participant could neither read nor write. Three participants had significant difficulties with writing. Five participants had difficulties while reading complex texts.

Participants lived in different arrangements: some independently in their own apartments, others with their parents, and some in a residential social services facility. All participants were users of social services from the same provider, which delivers both day (ambulatory) and residential support. This setting aligns with the study's practical focus on accessibility in social services and the legal obligations of service providers to deliver information in comprehensible formats.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health and Social Work at Trnava University before participant recruitment. The review confirmed that the study's aims, procedures, and participant roles complied with established ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, using materials presented in Easy-to-read formats. This procedure was consistent with the project's commitment to accessibility and with legal requirements for clear communication in social services.

Throughout the project, the two groups met for a total of fifteen sessions. Each session combines collaborative production and revision of Easy-to-read drafts with semi-structured focus-group discussions about participants' experiences with accessible information in their daily lives and their involvement in the research. Sessions were video recorded (with consent) and later transcribed using the Whisper transcription application.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In keeping with the participatory approach of our study, the analysis of the co-production process is deeply rooted in the participants' experiences. Rather than treating the data as a technical exercise in simplification, we sought to examine the social, relational, and emotional dynamics that shaped the process. The material presented here reflects participants' own words and insights, illustrating

how they negotiated meaning, shared knowledge, and exercised their initiative during the project. The preliminary findings are grouped into four thematic areas, which outline the main challenges and opportunities observed. These themes are: (1) simplifying complex texts, (2) utilising tools and visual aids, (3) fostering collaboration and communication, and (4) evaluation and research identity. Each theme is supported by participants' accounts that illustrate the lived realities of co-producing Easy-to-read texts.

(1) Simplifying Complex Texts

Participants emphasised the substantial challenge of converting highly technical standard 1.5 — Individual Planning into content that is accessible to a broader audience. The process required both patience and creativity. The original documentation, full of specialised jargon and complex concepts, was often described as overwhelming for those without a professional background. Participants also noted that the complexity of the standards made it difficult to communicate essential information clearly, underlining the importance of straightforward explanations and relatable examples. As one participant mentioned:

> "*We managed to distil the incredibly complicated text we started with, which was excessively lengthy and convoluted, into something that, hopefully, will be easier for everyone to understand.*"

The simplification process was an iterative journey that unfolded through a series of structured activities, including detailed explanations, engaging group discussions, and collaborative brainstorming sessions. Each round encouraged participants to share their views and to listen to one another, creating a collaborative and supportive atmosphere. Initially, some participants expressed doubts, perceiving the process as complicated and demanding. Over time, however, they began to recognise its benefits. Many participants noted that in-depth discussions and exchanges of ideas enhanced their understanding and informed their own approaches. By the end, participants considered the experience valuable: it supported individual growth, strengthened group cohesion, and provided new skills and insights applicable to future work. Although it was not always viewed positively, participants recognized it as a valuable journey of learning and growth:

> "*Sometimes it was difficult; I'm not always sure if the time spent was beneficial, but I know we gained insights along the way.*"

> "*Although I found some topics uninteresting, I still committed myself to the process, and my efforts were acknowledged and appreciated by my peers.*"

Despite facing numerous challenges throughout the learning process, participants recognised that these obstacles ultimately served to deepen their comprehension of the material. Participants reported that intensive discussions, collaborative tasks, and peer feedback enabled them to engage more deeply with the subject matter. Many indicated that overcoming these difficulties gave them a sense of achievement: they not only gained a better grasp of complex concepts but also developed skills in problem-solving and critical thinking. Participants described this transformation in understanding as extending beyond the meetings, equipping them with tools to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios. As one of them reflected:

> "*When we reframed the concepts in this way, it clicked for me; I finally grasped the underlying principles.*"

This collective effort deepened comprehension of complex content and encouraged collaboration and teamwork, as regular brainstorming brought together diverse perspectives and skills. We noted incremental progress in simplifying the material, which strengthened collaboration. The shared

experience of overcoming obstacles and achieving clarity fostered a supportive environment and reinforced commitment to the project.

Participants' experiences underscored the value of revisiting explanations through iterative cycles. Many noted that their understanding only "clicked" after concepts were reframed and discussed multiple times. This iterative process of explanation and feedback was important for building deeper understanding, though it required patience and extra time.

(2) Utilizing Tools and Visual Supports

Practical aids were deemed indispensable for a comprehensive understanding and effective application of the standards outlined in the project. These aids included various resources, such as instructional guides and interactive tools designed to facilitate learning. Among these, the glossary that was meticulously developed emerged as a standout resource, receiving frequent praise from participants for its clarity and thoroughness. It provided clear definitions of key terms and concepts, helping participants navigate the complexities of the standard. Participants reported that the glossary improved their comprehension and served as a reference throughout the implementation process. One of the participants mentioned:

> *"The glossary was incredibly helpful; whenever we encountered a term we didn't understand, we could easily refer to it and clarify our confusion. That was invaluable."*

Alongside textual aids that offer clear explanations and structured information, visual elements such as photos, drawings and images make the content more accessible and engaging. These visual tools supported comprehension by illustrating complex concepts in simplified form and helped sustain participants' attention. By integrating these visual components, we were able to cater to diverse learning styles and encourage active participation from readers, making the overall experience more interactive and enjoyable:

> *"I particularly appreciated the photos; they added a visual context that helped me grasp the concepts more clearly."*

Several participants took their creativity a step further by producing their own unique drawings inspired by the subject matter. These artistic expressions enhanced learning by helping participants to visualise complex concepts more concretely, while also deepening their personal engagement with the material, as each illustration reflected individual interpretations and insights. Co-researcher M., who could neither read nor write, took the self-initiative to create images, thereby taking on the role of group leader at that time. This hands-on approach enabled participants to explore the themes in greater depth and encouraged a stronger sense of ownership of their learning. In the final meeting, one participant reflected on this matter:

> *"For example, M. created a drawing of L. assisting a user on the stairs, which illustrated the practical application of the standards in a real-world scenario."*

Furthermore, the integration of visuals into the standards was closely linked to the employees' professional practices. One of them, who was participating in the co-production process, reflected on how similar techniques she uses in her work:

> *"In my job, I prepare individual and risk management plans using a similar approach. I incorporate pictures alongside the text to support our discussions and ensure that everyone involved understands the details clearly."*

The focus on drawings and photographs underscores the importance of multimodal strategies. For many participants, the creation of visual artefacts was not just a method of clarifying meaning; it was a way to connect abstract concepts to their real-life experiences and express their personal viewpoints. These artistic contributions strengthened participants' sense of ownership and engagement.

(3) Fostering Collaboration and Communication

Collaboration brought clear benefits, such as improved problem-solving and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, though it also presented challenges. We found that collaboration was most effective when tasks were shared in a supportive environment where individuals could contribute their own skills and insights. This process enhanced productivity and strengthened group cohesion. As one participant said:

> *"Better together. Collaboration."*

One participant stressed the importance of effective communication, noting that open dialogue builds both collaboration and trust. Regular check-ins and active listening were seen as essential for including all perspectives and supporting informed decision-making:

> *"To communicate together as a group. Cooperation."*

Group collaboration promoted cooperation but also posed challenges. Sustaining dialogue required patience and sensitivity, as differences in perspective and communication style often emerged. The researcher's observations highlighted the importance of active listening and empathy in creating an environment where all voices could be heard:

> *"It worked well for me, so I quickly typed my thoughts directly into the computer, allowing me to share my ideas efficiently. However, engaging in face-to-face conversations proved to be a challenge. I recognise the difficulties we all encountered in effectively communicating our perspectives."*

Collaboration encouraged open communication and mutual support but also required careful management of differing perspectives. Constructive feedback and respectful conflict resolution were important for sustaining effective dialogue:

> *"More patience… conversation. I like to have results immediately."*

Group reflections underlined the value of facilitation strategies. Participants welcomed opportunities for direct typing, turn-taking, and breaks during discussions. These strategies helped to manage communication differences, though reliance on professional terminology at times created barriers. The use of plain language was therefore identified as crucial for inclusivity and clear group interaction.

(4) Evaluation and Research Identity

Participants evaluated the outcomes positively, noting the influence of their individual contributions on the overall progress of the project. They valued the collaborative effort and identified specific ways in which their skills and insights contributed to the work, reflecting a sense of ownership in the achievements:

"And this is all your achievement… You invented it all. And it is a piece of good work."
"I think what we did together is really something special."
"I enjoyed it."

Several participants identified strongly with the role of researchers, embodying the essence of inquiry and exploration in their work. Through discussions, many highlighted their experiences in formulating questions and disseminating findings to contribute to their respective fields. This emerging identity as researchers influenced how participants saw their own development and encouraged a collaborative spirit, as they exchanged insights and discussed the challenges encountered during the process:

"We were researchers; we only missed the magnifying glass."

While acknowledging the significance of their efforts, they also recognised the resource intensity involved in the process, particularly regarding the substantial energy and investments required to achieve their goals. This awareness led them to reflect on more sustainable practices that might reduce their environmental footprint while still allowing them to meet their objectives:

"I really liked it, but from a time perspective, I think it is very demanding for an employee."

The results highlight that co-producing Easy-to-read texts was seen as both challenging and rewarding. Although participants described the process as time-consuming and at times frustrating, they also regarded it as empowering. They viewed simplification as a collective act of sense-making, enhanced by using glossaries, drawings, and photographs. While collaboration fostered solidarity and trust, it also required patience to navigate communication barriers. Participants expressed pride in the outcomes and began to see themselves as researchers, recognising their role in co-creating knowledge within inclusive research.

Participants also stressed that, although the experience was empowering, it was highly time intensive. This raised concerns about sustainability: while they valued being recognised as researchers and co-creators, they questioned whether such involvement could be maintained without additional structural support or peer facilitation.

These preliminary findings are consistent with theories of inclusive research and universal design. They point to the potential of shared authorship, while also exposing the practical constraints and resource demands of co-production. The discussion situates these results within the social model of disability, co-production, and inclusive research, and considers their implications for theory and practice.

DISCUSSION

The preliminary findings point to both the empowering possibilities and the structural challenges of co-producing Easy-to-read texts with people with intellectual disabilities. In this section, we analyse the four themes in relation to existing theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how the participants' voices both affirm and expand discussions within inclusive research.

Simplification as Shared Meaning-Making

Simplifying dense standards was not simply a matter of rewording complicated texts; it was an epistemic process that involved collective negotiation of meaning among participants. They articulated their experiences with comments like, "*We managed to simplify that terribly complicated text into something that we understand.*" This statement underscores that simplification went beyond

the creation of shorter sentences; it was an intricate process that involved interpretation, discussion, and continuous reworking of the content until it became truly meaningful and accessible to all involved.

This collaborative effort reflects the social model of disability, which holds that barriers stem not from impairments but from inaccessible communication and environments (Iwarsson, Ståhl, 2003). By working through professional jargon and technical language, participants shifted from being passive recipients to active interpreters of the text. In demonstrating this active engagement, they embodied what Nind (2014) terms "*expertise by experience*" (Nind, 2014). This concept shows that people with lived experience can offer perspectives that may be inaccessible to professional researchers. Their contributions were therefore central to the process of simplification.

Although the outcomes were positive, the simplification process also posed challenges. Participants reported fatigue and expressed scepticism during discussions. One participant noted, "*Sometimes it was difficult; I am not always sure if the time spent was beneficial.*" Such remarks reflect the struggle of navigating complex material and the emotional and cognitive toll of the process. We are questioning whether the institutional culture of the social service provider, in which co-researchers are users, plays a role in this situation. This dynamic appears to lead to a lack of opportunities for them to take on active roles, a deficiency in personal expectations, and a tendency to yield to the institutional demands of the social service provider.

Participants nevertheless saw the process as valuable, as it deepened their understanding of complex texts and supported the development of new skills. This aligns with the critical observation by Chinn and Homeyard (2017) that collaborative work, while resource-intensive, leads to accessibility gains that substantiate the assertion regarding its worth (Chinn, Homeyard, 2017).

The process of simplification in this project may be understood as a collective "*epistemic practice,*" a collaborative means of producing, validating, and reshaping knowledge. Simplification is not just about rewriting text; it is about actively engaging in the reconstruction of meaning in ways that empower individuals with intellectual disabilities, allowing them to emerge as legitimate contributors to knowledge creation. Through this process, participants strengthen both their understanding of complex materials and their ability to communicate such ideas effectively.

Our findings point to the value of iterative cycles of explanation, in which meaning is revisited and refined over time. Chinn and Pelletier (2020) emphasize that simplification is a cyclical process of negotiation and feedback, a view supported by Bruun et al. (2024), who note that repetition helps participants with diverse communication needs to solidify understanding and gain confidence (Chinn, Pelletier, 2020; Bruun et al., 2024). By incorporating iterative feedback into facilitation, Easy-to-read co-production avoids oversimplification and encourages shared ownership of meaning, motivating all participants to engage actively.

Tools and Universal Design

The use of glossaries, photographs, and drawings in the materials illustrates the role of universal design in supporting effective communication. Participants emphasised the indispensable nature of the glossary, stating, "*The glossary helped; whenever we encountered unfamiliar terms or concepts, we pulled it out and used it.*" This highlights how it served not merely as a reference tool but as a vital resource that facilitated understanding throughout the process. Moreover, the visuals far from being supplementary played a transformative role in the learning experience, turning abstract parts of the standard into tangible representations. One participant noted, "*I liked the photos the most*," which illustrates a clear preference for visual aids that clarified and contextualised the information being presented, allowing for a deeper comprehension and engagement with the material.

This aligns with Persson et al.'s (2015) view that universal design also concerns communicative accessibility and with the "design for all" ethos articulated by EIDD-Design for All Europe (2004), which the project operationalised through multimodal supports. (EIDD-Design for All Europe, 2004; Persson et al., 2015).

An important element of the initiative was the active involvement of participants, who contributed their own drawings, including one depicting assistance in navigating stairs. This level of engagement elevates the practice beyond mere tokenism, as participants were not passively consuming a predetermined resource; instead, they were dynamic co-creators of multimodal meaning. They were engaged as co-researchers and authors throughout the entire process, from the initial idea and discussions to decision-making and the final realisation. Co-researchers were able to weave their unique experiences and perspectives into the project's outputs, thereby enriching its overall relevance and accessibility with a rich tapestry of diversity.

Participants also linked these visual tools to their professional practice, noting their applicability in real-world contexts. One employee elaborated, stating, "*In my job, I prepare individual and risk management plans using a similar methodological approach*." This observation suggests that the co-produced visual supports facilitate understanding within the project and are transferable to other professional settings, extending their practical utility beyond the initial context.

The use of photographs and drawings by participants aligns with evidence on multimodal and arts-based methods. Harris indicates that artistic approaches, like drawing and storytelling, help convey difficult perspectives (Harris et al., 2024). Bigby, Frawley and Ramcharan (2014) emphasize that multimodal support promotes active engagement and accessibility for various learning styles. Our data is consistent with these findings, indicating that multimodal approaches are integral to universal design in communication.

Collaboration and Shared Power

The preliminary findings point to the relational dimension of co-production. On the one hand, participants stressed the benefits of collaboration, often noting that they achieved more together: *"Better together. Collaboration."* On the other hand, many found it difficult to maintain consistent communication. As one participant put it, "*Talking with each other was difficult for me*." This illustrates the dual nature of collaboration: while it can be rewarding, it also depends on sustained and often demanding communication.

This tension reflects broader and significant debates within the realm of inclusive research. As highlighted by Walmsley and Johnson (2003), true inclusion transcends the mere act of inviting individuals to participate; it necessitates a fundamental restructuring of research processes to ensure that all contributions are not just welcomed, but also meaningful and impactful (Walmsley, Johnson, 2003). Similarly Sitbon et al. (2020) emphasize that effective engagement in inclusive research requires thorough preparatory work. This expects to address challenges such as managing energy levels, sustaining motivation, and overcoming communication barriers among diverse participants. Our preliminary findings reinforce these insights; participants explicitly requested "*more patience*," indicating that fostering inclusive co-production is emotionally taxing and time intensive and that individuals may need additional support to navigate collaboration successfully.

Effective facilitation inclusive co-production involves structuring discussions with breaks, maintaining pace, and ensuring that all participants' voices are acknowledged. It also requires encouraging contributions from quieter members and creating an environment where different perspectives can be expressed. Balancing the flow of conversation and managing group dynamics enables facilitators to support inclusive discussion and more informed decision-making. This underlines the importance of skilled facilitation in supporting both participation and a sense of belonging among contributors.

Participants highlighted both solidarity and fatigue, revealing tension inclusive research. Walmsley and Johnson (2003) note that meaningful participation requires restructuring power relations, while Sitbon et al. (2020) point to communication fatigue as a barrier (Walmsley, Johnson, 2003; Sitbon et al., 2020). The call for "*more patience*" and challenges in maintaining conversations reflect these issues. The literature points to strategies such as role rotation, structured breaks, and explicit ground rules to reduce professional dominance and support balanced participation in inclusive research.

Emergent Research Identity

An important outcome of the study was that participants began to identify themselves as co-researchers. Their humorous remark "*We were researchers; we only missed the magnifying glass.*" captures a deeper, transformative recognition of themselves as active producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients. This shift in self-perception is significant as it highlights their engagement in the research process. Other comments, such as "*It is a piece of good work.*" and "*I think what we did together is really something special.*" illustrate a profound sense of pride and emotional fulfilment tied to their ownership of the outcomes produced during the project.

This sentiment aligns with Walmsley et al.'s (2018) concept of "added value" in inclusive research, where participants' involvement contributes to findings and fosters empowerment and recognition beyond the immediate outputs (Walmsley et al., 2018). Parent-Johnson and Duncan (2024) further elaborate on this theme, discussing inclusive dissemination as a collaborative process through which individuals with disabilities assume the role of co-authors of knowledge, enriching the research landscape with their unique perspectives and experiences.

Participants also candidly acknowledged the inherent challenges within this collaborative framework: "*From a time perspective, I think it is very demanding for an employee.*" Although preparing Easy-to-read texts can be time-consuming, we are investigating how much this process is influenced by a paternalistic approach and the institutional culture of social service providers. According to the Social Services Act No. 448/2008, a participatory approach is essential for effectively supporting users in social services. Co-production and participation should be integral to the everyday work of employees.

But, without adequate institutional recognition, support, and resources, the value of these collaborative research processes may be undermined. Organisations therefore need to address these challenges to sustain participation and engagement (Chinn, Homeyard, 2017).

Similar findings are evident in international projects where participants adopt a co-researcher identity, reporting empowerment, recognition, and increased advocacy (Walmsley et al., 2018; Parent-Johnson, Duncan, 2024). However, participants also highlighted the time burden, a structural risk identified in the literature (Chinn, Homeyard, 2017; Chinn, Pelletier, 2020). This points to the importance of institutional commitment, including resources, recognition, and pathways for continued involvement. Participants' reflections indicate the need for peer-support structures and ongoing facilitation to support a lasting shift in identity.

CONCLUSION

This article summarises our preliminary findings on co-producing Easy-to-read standards with people with intellectual disabilities. These insights form part of an ongoing study and point to both the opportunities and the challenges of co-production.

Our analysis suggests that co-production is more than a technical exercise: it entails epistemic and relational practices. Simplification requires cycles of explanation and feedback, through which meaning is negotiated and collectively shared. Although time-consuming, these processes enable participants to contribute as producers of knowledge.

We found that multimodal approaches, such as problem-solving training with a focus on concrete goals, role-playing, glossaries, photographs, and participants' illustrations, supported an in-depth understanding of the research topic, its ownership, and expression. At the same time, co-production involved challenges including fatigue and time pressure, pointing to the value of strategies such as role rotation and structured breaks. Peer support was seen as both helpful and demanding, requiring careful management to avoid reinforcing hierarchies.

A key outcome is the development of a research identity among participants, who through the process came to see themselves as *"co-researchers"*. At the beginning of the research, participants identified themselves as the passive recipients of the information from an unfamiliar person. This

shift fosters pride and empowerment, but concerns about sustainability remain in the absence of institutional support. Continuous opportunities and recognition are vital for lasting empowerment. From these preliminary findings, we identify five implications for social work research and the practice of social service providers implementing quality standards:

- **First, co-production is epistemic for social work:** social workers and social work researchers should recognise people with intellectual disabilities as legitimate contributors to meaning making when quality standards and other key documents are developed, implemented and evaluated.
- **Second, universal design must be central in social service provision:** glossaries, visuals, and creative outputs are practical tools that help providers meet their obligation to offer information in comprehensible formats to service users.
- **Third, skilled facilitation is an ethical requirement in social work:** effective communication, pacing of meetings, and emotional support to enable inclusive participation in individual planning and related research processes.
- **Fourth, recognition fosters empowerment and advocacy:** explicitly naming participants as co-researchers and valuing their expertise by experience can strengthen their position within social services and in wider social work contexts.
- **Fifth, institutional support is crucial in social service systems:** without organisational time, resources and recognition for co-production, efforts to involve users in quality-standard work risk remaining tokenistic and may contribute to burnout among both staff and users.

In conclusion, co-production should be viewed as integral to social work research and to the everyday practice of social service providers who must involve users in planning and providing information in accessible forms. Inclusive research that incorporates iterative learning, multimodal design, skilled facilitation, and sustained recognition can thus inform how social workers design, communicate, and review quality standards with service users. Future stages of the study will examine further the opportunities and challenges of co-producing Easy-to-read materials.

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Consideration of the Role of Medication in Maintaining Abstinence in Social Work with Clients who Developed Alcohol Dependence during Maternity/Parental Leave[1]

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Abstract
OBJECTIVE: To describe, from the perspective of individuals who developed alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave, the role that medication plays in maintaining abstinence and to formulate proposals for social work with this target group. THEORETICAL BASE: The paper focuses on addiction and current approaches used in social work with people experiencing addiction. METHODS: A qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews. OUTCOMES: An account of how participants perceive the role of medication in maintaining abstinence, accompanied by suggestions for the practice of social and clinical social workers. Three roles emerged: (1) craving-reducing medication as supportive scaffolding in early abstinence, (2) craving-reducing medication perceived as a sign of personal failure, and (3) antidepressants and anxiolytics as support for managing mental distress. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: Addiction treatment is a complex process in which some clients refuse medication. Exploring the issue from the perspective of individuals with lived experience is beneficial for practitioners.

Keywords
addiction, alcohol, maternity/parental leave, medication, social work

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INTRODUCTION

For many parents, parental or maternity leave is among the most joyful periods of life. At the same time, however, it can be one of the most demanding. The transition to a new role and changes to daily routines may have various adverse effects on the caregiver, including the development of substance abuse such as alcohol dependence. Growing attention has been paid to mental health in general, and the mental health of people on maternity/parental leave is no exception. Alcohol dependence in one parent is often associated with numerous social, economic, and health problems that affect the whole family (Lander, Howsare, Byrne, 2013). Addressing this issue is therefore essential. This article was written as a part of the Student Grant Competition at the College of Polytechnics Jihlava as project No. INT/2025/0001, Development of Alcohol Dependence during Maternity/Parental Leave. The project aims to map the trajectory from excessive alcohol consumption during maternity/parental leave to help-seeking and subsequent maintenance of sobriety. This paper is one of the project's partial outputs. Its objective is to describe the role of medication in maintaining abstinence from the perspective of people who developed alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave and to design proposals for social work with this target group. Patients' attitudes toward medication and medication refusal are major issues across psychiatry, as well as in alcohol dependence treatment. For social and clinical social workers, understanding how clients perceive medication is crucial.

THEORETICAL BASE

Alcohol is defined by Act No. 65/2017 Coll., on the protection of health from the harmful effects of addictive substances (Section 2f), as spirits, beer, wine, or other beverages containing more than 0.5% alcohol by volume. According to the National Health Information Portal (NHIP, 2025a), more than 6,500 people die each year in the Czech Republic due to excessive alcohol consumption. In ICD-11, alcohol dependence is defined as a disorder of regulation of alcohol use resulting from repeated or continuous use, characterized by a strong internal urge (craving), impaired control over use, increasing priority of use over other activities, and continued use despite harm. Physiological signs such as tolerance and withdrawal may be present. Symptoms usually persist for at least 12 months, but when use occurs on a near-daily basis, the duration requirement may be less than 12 months. (WHO, 2025). The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA, 2025) reports that in 2024, an average of 244,873 recipients of parental allowance were on parental leave each month (239,701 women and 5,172 men). There were 74,000 people on maternity leave, 98% of whom were women. Despite the joy of having a child, maternity/parental leave is highly demanding. Individuals may experience loneliness and reduced social contact. Couple and wider family relationships are exposed to new routines and may become strained. The physical and mental demands of stereotypical childcare can lead to fatigue, exhaustion, and, in some cases, the development of addiction. Although precise estimates of alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave are lacking, attention to parental mental health has increased over the past two decades, alongside research on the specifics of alcohol addiction in women. The WHO (2025) reports rising alcohol consumption among women, increases in female hospitalizations, detoxification admissions, and deaths related to alcohol have also been noted (IHISCR, 2021). Mravčík et al. (2021) report that women accounted for 34% of residents in rehabilitation facilities in 2010 and 36% in 2020. Expert sources (Nešpor, 2006; Kohoutek, 2007; Stašová et al., 2023) note that women metabolize and tolerate alcohol differently from men and are more likely to experience anxiety, dual disorders, and depression. Women also tend to seek help later due to economic and social barriers, shame, and a desire to maintain caregiver roles (Molina-Fernández, 2024).

Typologies of alcohol dependence offer insight into aetiology and treatment. Lesch's typology describes four types: I — allergic, II — coping with problems and anxiety, III — alcohol as

an antidepressant, IV — conditioning (Golda, Walter, Lesch, 2011). Skála (1988), drawing on Jellinek's classification, distinguishes alpha (self-medication, mood improvement), beta (early stage), gamma (impaired control, reduced ability to abstain, increasing drunkenness), and epsilon (alternating bouts of excessive drinking and abstinence).

Treatment may be provided on an outpatient basis (in psychiatric and addiction clinics) or inpatient (in day care centres, therapeutic communities). It may include pharmacotherapy and/or non-pharmacological intervention, with psychotherapy and social support playing a key role in both. Commonly prescribed medicines include naltrexone (which reduces reward/craving), acamprosate (which helps maintain abstinence after detoxification), disulfiram (an aversive deterrent), and newer agents such as nalmefene (Šimůnková, Hrubeš, 2015; NHIP, 2025b). Side effects range from nausea, fatigue, headaches, drowsiness, or insomnia to rare but severe reactions (allergic reactions, breathing problems, hallucinations, confusion, heart pain, or palpitations (Substitution Treatment, 2025). Reasons for refusing medication include perceived recovery after initial improvement, desire to "heal oneself", distrust of medicines, limited insights, low family support, and social stigma (Belcher et al., 2017; Jaeger, Hüther, Steinert, 2019; Hicks, West, 2020).

During treatment, clients may work with physicians, addiction specialists, social/clinical social workers and psychotherapists. Social/clinical social workers encounter addicted parents across all kinds of settings (e.g., families, homelessness services) and support recovery and independent living. According to the job description (Czech and Slovak Social Work, 2020), the purpose of this position is to support recovery and help resolve issues that play a crucial role in independent living after treatment. The most commonly used approaches are task-oriented and systemic. Desirable skills include the ability to set boundaries for clients or apply sanctions.

Contemporary practice in social work with people experiencing addiction has shifted from control-oriented abstinence models towards holistic, community-anchored, client-participatory approaches that integrate recovery, harm reduction, gender sensitivity and social inclusion (Garlant, 2023; Singwane, Ramoshaba, 2023; Kurrila et al., 2025; Votavová, Šťastná, 2025). Recovery is understood as a long-term process that involves quality of life, relationships and personal/social resources. Peer support and participatory methods are increasingly valued. (Brand, 2017; Nepustil, 2021; EUDA, 2024). SAMHSA (2012) defines recovery as: "*A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.*" The basis of this principle is therefore not the belief that all symptoms of addiction should disappear or that it is necessary to completely stop using the substance to which the individual is addicted, because the substance itself is not the cause of the addiction. (Nepustil, 2020). SAMHSA (2012) also describes four major dimensions: Health, Home, Purpose, Community and ten guiding principles of recovery: Hope, Relational, Person-Driven, Culture, Many Pathways, Addresses Trauma, Holistic, Strength/Responsibility, Peer support, Respect.

Addiction is conceptualized within the framework of social determinants such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, homelessness, and violence (WHO, UNODC, 2020; Kurrila et al., 2025). This perspective supports the development of integrated, community-based care that employs case management to coordinate services (Urban, Hricová, Ondráček, 2024). Harm reduction has become a mainstream component of such systems, typically combined with motivational interviewing and broader social support. According to Heddrich, Hartnoll (2021) the goal of harm reduction is: "To reduce both the individual and societal harms of drug use through knowledge-based interventions that change risks, risk behaviours and risk settings. "To reduce individual and societal harms associated with drug use through knowledge-based interventions that address risks, risk behaviors, and risk settings." The harm reduction approach is based on the concept of addiction as a form of learned behaviour. Interventions therefore aim at re-education, resocialization, and transforming behaviour into less harmful and less risky patterns. In practice, this means that interventions do not target the complete elimination of alcohol, but rather the reduction of the amount consumed.

The foundation of this approach is the acceptance of the following facts:

- Legal and illegal drugs have been, are, and will continue to be part of all societies.
- Some patterns of drug use are safer than others.
- Completing abstinence is not always the most appropriate goal.
- Any positive change is welcomed.

Interventions are divided into societal-level interventions and individual-level interventions. Societal-level interventions include, for example, restricting alcohol advertising or limiting its sale or consumption in certain locations. Individual-level interventions include, for example, providing guidelines for responsible consumption. (Gossop, 2000; McVinney, 2005; Vavrinčíková, 2012).
For people on maternity/parental leave, social workers should consider: Dual identity (parent and client), heightened shame/fear (e.g., child removal), the need for safe spaces (community/maternity programs), strengthening social ties to mitigate loneliness, and integrated health-social-psychological support (housing, finances, childcare, healthcare). Case management and "dual care" models (parallel support for parent and child) are recommended, with attention to trauma, anxiety disorders, postpartum depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. A trauma-informed approach minimizes threat and promotes trust. Collaboration with physicians can reduce medication discontinuation due to child-related concerns. Family-systems' work (including partner communication, parenting skills, and alternative supports) is crucial. Beyond eliminating addiction, social work should strengthen self-efficacy and identity beyond the "addict" label (education, employment, self-care), with long-term aims of stabilizing parenting and preventing transmission of addiction (WHO, UNODC, 2020; Mardani et al., 2023; EUDA, 2024).

METHODS

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals who developed alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave. The format strikes a balance between openness and coverage of key areas (Švaříček, Šeďová, 2007; Gill et al., 2008). Ten participants (P1–P10) took part in the interviews, comprising nine women and one man. The participants were recruited via Facebook support groups. The snowball method was used until information saturation was reached. The social media groups through which participants were recruited are open to anyone interested, bringing together individuals of different ages, varying levels of social support, and diverse economic backgrounds. Their health status and life trajectories may also differ significantly. It is therefore logical that the group of participants in our study is not homogeneous.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

Participant	Age	Education level	Gender	Addiction in the family	Support from family and close ones	Additional psychiatric diagnosis	Hospitalization for addiction treatment	Financial situation
P1	35	primary	female	yes	yes	no	yes	satisfactory
P2	32	university	female	yes	yes	no	yes	satisfactory
P3	39	high school	female	no	no	yes	yes	satisfactory
P4	28	high school	female	yes	yes	yes	no	unsatisfactory
P5	24	university	female	yes	yes	yes	yes	unsatisfactory
P6	40	primary	female	yes	yes	no	yes	satisfactory
P7	32	high school	female	yes	no	yes	no	unsatisfactory
P8	43	high school	male	yes	no	no	no	unsatisfactory
P9	36	university	female	yes	yes	no	yes	unsatisfactory
P10	27	high school	female	yes	no	yes	no	satisfactory

Inclusion criteria: development of alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave; help-seeking (formal — outpatient/inpatient — informal — online support groups); abstinence at the time of interview; insight into their situation. Interviews lasted 70–150 minutes and were conducted between March and June 2025, either in person (at a location comfortable for the participant) or online.
Both authors are mothers, with one currently on parental leave, and neither has personal experience of alcohol addiction. However, they are aware of its potential impact on children and families, which motivates their research. Both work in helping professions and have experience conducting interviews with individuals whose behaviours may be stigmatized, reducing the likelihood of significant subjective bias.
The data collection instrument and analysis were conducted collaboratively by both authors, further minimizing individual bias. One author established contact with participants via social media, clearly communicating the study's purpose and primarily listening without guiding responses. Interviews were conducted in a friendly atmosphere, and while participants responded openly, emotional intensity was sometimes noticeable.

This paper addresses the research question RQ: "*What is the role of medication in maintaining abstinence*?"
The interviews' audio was recorded, transcribed, and coded (Microsoft Excel). Data were anonymized. Thematic analysis involved familiarization, generation of initial codes, clustering into potential themes, review and definition of themes, and production of a narrative supported by verbatim quotes (Švaříček, Šeďová, 2007). To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied during data analysis. Both authors independently analysed the interview data and then discussed interpretations to minimize subjective bias (investigator triangulation). Multiple perspectives from participants with different experiences of motherhood and alcohol use were considered (data triangulation). Additionally, the results were interpreted using various theoretical frameworks.
Topics and subcategories identified:

Table 2: Thematic analysis — topics and subcategories

Topic	**Subcategories**
Use of medicines as a coping strategy in motherhood	stress management; anxiety; insomnia; emotional exhaustion
Ambivalent relationship toward pharmacological treatment	ambivalence; mistrust; stigma; lack of information
Structural and relational barriers to adherence	motherhood; shame; self-control; social pressure
Professional support and empowerment	practical barriers; access to healthcare; social support
Perceived impact of medication on daily life and motherhood	trust; awareness; partnership approach - motivation; self-reflection; stabilization
Recovery, empowerment and the reconstruction of identity	emotional change; role coping; relationship with the child

RESULTS

The research question was: "*What is the role of medication in maintaining abstinence?*"
Three roles emerged:
1. Craving-reducing medication as supportive scaffolding in early abstinence
Most research participants perceived medication as support that helped them cope with the first phase of abstinence, which was often discontinued after inpatient treatment or after the most

challenging period. Medicines were described as one coping strategy among others. Stressors included role conflicts (parent vs. treatment client), family prejudice, emotion regulation, exhaustion, loneliness, conflict with extended family/acquaintances, and financial strain. *Recovery, empowerment, and identity reconstruction* were viewed as demanding. Medication was seen as a natural, yet secondary, aid. As P5 stated: *"For me, Antabuse is an absolutely great crutch."* Participants emphasized they could not rely on medication alone and regarded it as backup support for acute cravings.

Professional support and empowerment were integral to this role. P8, who faced child custody proceedings, reported that authorities interpreted medication use as an active commitment to treatment. P9 realized she could remain sober without medication, yet faced family pressure: *"After treatment, I was taking Antabuse. I stopped taking it because I realized I could live without it. I really didn't want to drink, and I didn't need any medication for that."* This role was salient among participants who reflected on how medicines affected daily functioning.

2. Craving-reducing medication perceived as a sign of personal failure

Grounded in the themes of Structural and relational barriers to adherence and Ambivalent relationships toward pharmacological treatment, some participants viewed taking medication as evidence of an inability to cope independently. P10: "I refused Antabuse. I'll happily go anywhere every day to get help, but I just want to avoid Antabuse. I don't take any medication — no craving medication, no antidepressants." P2 expressed similar views: "I think I'm managing it well even without that." P4 considered medication a postponement rather than a solution: "My friend in her third treatment always left with Antabuse. When she stopped, she relapsed. It seemed there was no point if it only delayed the problem." P4 described choosing to endure distress without sedatives after an initial diazepam dose upon admission.

3. Antidepressants and anxiolytics as support for managing mental distress

Comorbid mental disorders (anxiety, depression) complicated treatment and daily life and featured prominently within the topic Recovery, empowerment, and the reconstruction of identity.

Several participants indicated that alcohol had initially substituted for unmet mental health needs during maternity/parental leave (sleep deprivation, isolation, shifted rhythms, relationship dissatisfaction). Following professional help, they were diagnosed with depression or anxiety; in some cases, these conditions were understood as caused or exacerbated by alcohol use.

P3: *"The psychiatrist found I was suffering from anxiety and prescribed antidepressants. I can finally fall asleep at a normal time."* P4: *"I'm taking light antidepressants. We are slowly tapering."*

None of the participants considered antidepressants/anxiolytics a personal failure. Instead, they were viewed as components of comprehensive support alongside psychotherapy, outpatient treatment, support groups, and family. Some nonetheless expressed a desire to live without any medication in the future.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL/CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKERS

One aim of this paper was to develop proposals for social and clinical social workers working with individuals whose addiction developed during maternity/parental leave.

Aligned with current trends toward integrated, community-based, client-participatory care, the following proposals target individuals whose addiction developed during maternity/parental leave. Professionals should maintain a comprehensive client history that includes attitudes toward medication.

1. Clarify options and risks. While prescribing within the psychiatrist's remit, social/clinical social workers can reinforce and contextualize information, address inconsistencies between

medical advice, online content and peers' experience, and facilitate clients' deliberation. Within a multidisciplinary team, each member has their own roles and responsibilities. The activities described above are carried out specifically by social workers. (Czech and Slovak Social Work, 2020).
The proposal's connection to our research results: Our findings show frequent ambivalence that benefits from informed dialogue.

2. Sustain motivation across treatment stages. Discussions about forthcoming steps, with or without medication, can reduce anxiety. Clients who struggle with adherence or consider discontinuation benefit from planned transitions. (Belcher et al., 2017; Jaeger, Hüther, Steinert, 2019; Hicks, West, 2020).
The proposal's connection to our research results: Our findings show that some people with addiction want to discontinue medication. If they are already considering stopping the medication, they would welcome support in preparing for this change.

3. Support daily structure. Help embed medication into routines (reminders, pill organizers, brief logs). Caregivers of young children often feel overwhelmed, routines reduce.
The proposal's connection to our research results: In line with the professional literature, (Nešpor, 2006; Kohoutek, 2007; Stašová et al., 2023) our research indicates that individuals with addiction may experience difficulties with establishing and maintaining daily routines and adhering to them.

4. Engage families/loved ones (with consent). Provide education on addiction, the purpose of medication and dosing, and clients' limits. Families may exert undue pressure (e.g., insisting on medication no longer needed). Social and clinical social workers can open constructive dialogue. Family involvement is a key principle in contemporary social work practices with individuals experiencing addiction. (Nepustil, 2020; 2021; Garlant, 2023; Singwane, Ramoshaba, 2023; Kurrila et al., 2025; Votavová, Šťastná, 2025).
The proposal's connection to our research results: Our research indicates that families may exert undue pressure on individuals with addiction, urging them to continue pharmacological treatment that is no longer clinically warranted. Social workers are well-positioned to initiate and facilitate dialogue on this issue.

5. Monitor social determinants relevant to adherence. Housing, finances, employment, and acute stressors can affect adherence and how medication use/non-use is interpreted by institutions (e.g., landlords, employers). Discuss potential interpretations proactively. According to the professional literature (WHO, UNODC, 2020; Mardani et al., 2023; EUDA, 2024; Urban, Hricová, Ondráček, 2024) beyond eliminating addiction, social work should strengthen self-efficacy and identity beyond the "addict" label (education, employment, self-care), with long-term aims of stabilizing parenting and preventing transmission of addiction.
The proposal's connection to our research results: Our research indicates that it is essential to engage individuals with addiction in discussions about how the use or discontinuation of medication may be interpreted.

6. Integrate parenting-role support. Medication may affect mood, energy, and functioning. Address role priorities, time for self-care, and parenting competencies. Clients must devote attention to both their children and themselves. (WHO, UNODC, 2020; Mardani et al., 2023; EUDA, 2024) describe the challenges associated with managing a dual identity – being both a parent and a client in addiction treatment.
The 'proposal's connection to our research results: The accounts provided by our participants suggest that it is essential for social workers to engage individuals with addiction in conversations about

roles and priorities. Individuals with addiction need to allocate time and attention both to their children and to themselves.

7. Leverage peer and online supports. Participants valued social-media groups focused on addiction and parenting for continuous, out-of-hours support. In the context of online support, it is essential to promote digital literacy and safety. Urban, Hricová, and Ondráček (2024) emphasize the importance of broad social support and various support groups, both formal and informal.
The proposal's connection to our research results: Statements from our research participants indicate that they consider these groups to be significant and beneficial, and they value the continuous support that is not limited to the official operating hours of a specific service.

8. Create pathways to lived-experience roles. Encourage peer lecturing/consulting or volunteering where appropriate. One participant emphasized the transformative value of peer support. Such roles can strengthen purpose and social embeddedness. In contemporary professional sources, such as EUDA (2024), Nepustil (2021), and Brand (2017), peer support and participatory methods are increasingly valued.
The proposal's connection to our research results: One participant in our research reported that the support of a peer consultant was highly beneficial and now recognizes the value of providing support to others. Opportunities to work as a peer educator or peer consultant, or to volunteer in a similar capacity, can provide clients with an important sense of meaning and usefulness.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how individuals who developed alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave perceived the role of medication in sustaining abstinence and proposed implications for social work practice. Participants had been abstinent for 1–7 years; therefore, the retrospective design may be influenced by heterogeneity in time since onset and by recall and optimism biases. The heterogeneous sample (age, education, socioeconomic status, social support, outpatient vs inpatient pathways, varying dependence typologies (Skála, 1988; Golda, Walter, Lesch, 2011) limits generalizability of the findings. When recruiting participants through Facebook support groups and parenting communities, it became evident that these online spaces were highly heterogeneous in terms of demographics, life situations, and the severity and course of substance use. Members differed significantly in age, socioeconomic background, relationship status, mental health history, and the extent of their engagement with the group. Because of this heterogeneity, the research sample could not be considered homogeneous in any of these aspects. The only unifying criterion for inclusion in the study was that participants had developed alcohol dependence during maternity or parental leave. This focus reflects the aim of the research, which was to explore how alcohol use and subsequent dependence emerged within the unique context of early parenthood and how women navigated this experience while caring for young children. The heterogeneity of the groups from which the participants were recruited is both a limitation and a strength of the qualitative design. While it prevents broader generalization, it allows for capturing diverse experiences and identifying shared underlying mechanisms that transcend demographic differences. For these reasons, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met the central criterion while accepting variability in all other characteristics. However, social workers routinely encounter similarly diverse clients. Recommendations must be adapted to local contexts and individual needs. Nine women and one man participated in the study. Statistics from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA, 2025) indicate that there are significantly more women than men on maternity or parental leave in the Czech Republic. Theoretical sources (Nešpor, 2006; Kohoutek, 2007; Stašová et al., 2023) describe several ways in which alcohol dependence in women differs from addiction in men. In our study, however, the male participant did not describe his addiction

or treatment in ways that differed from the accounts provided by the female participants. We are aware that this reflects the account of only one participant. At the time of the research, this participant was involved in court proceedings with his former partner regarding custody of their son. The arrangements and rules for caregiving changed rapidly and unpredictably. The participant needed to be at home on certain days and to have sufficient time and energy for his son. He described entering residential addiction treatment as unimaginable, much like the majority of the women in our study. Nevertheless, we consider this finding important. According to research by the company Marketing and Media (Hauser, 2024), men make up 56% of Facebook users worldwide. However, women are much more active in joining various groups, participating in events, and sharing content. In the groups we approached, there was a higher proportion of male users, but they were unwilling to participate in the research Scholarly sources (Hawke et al., 2024) confirm that there is a clear gender difference in willingness to participate in research, particularly in studies focused on social issues. This difference is likely related to women's greater interest in social and interpersonal topics, a higher degree of altruism in the research context, greater openness in sharing personal experiences, and their more active engagement in communities, groups, and online forums. In research dealing with parenting and caregiving, women's willingness to participate is significantly higher. Conversely, studies focused on sports, technology, or those involving higher levels of risk tend to attract greater participation from men.

The study involved only ten participants, which raises questions regarding the generalizability of the findings to a broader population, given the qualitative nature of the research. However, no new themes or insights emerged during the interviews, suggesting that additional participants were unlikely to contribute further to the understanding of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the small sample size should be considered a limitation, as it may influence the interpretation of results and their applicability to other contexts or populations.

Consistent with prior sources (Belcher et al, 2017; Jaeger, Hüther, Steinert, 2019; Hicks, West, 2020), some participants refused craving-targeted medication, viewing it as a failure and compensated through intensified engagement in psychotherapy and daily coping.

Another group views medications that reduce alcohol cravings as an important form of support and does not consider their use a sign of failure. For families, the knowledge that their loved one is taking such medication can also be reassuring. Contrary to the literature (Belcher et al, 2017; Jaeger, Hüther, Steinert, 2019; Hicks, West, 2020), none of our participants rejected the use of antidepressants or anxiolytics. They regarded them as components of comprehensive treatment and as preventive measures that help them avoid returning to alcohol as a way of coping with psychological distress.

For social workers who engage with individuals experiencing addiction, it is crucial to understand their 'clients' attitudes toward medication and to incorporate this understanding into their practice. At the same time, it is important to recognize that some participants expressed ambivalent feelings about medication, and that their perspectives may shift over time. A change in circumstances—such as the resolution of court proceedings concerning child custody—may influence their attitudes toward pharmacological support.

Of course, the perspectives of individuals with addiction on using medication to maintain abstinence represent only one standpoint. Physicians, addiction specialists, and social or clinical social workers may evaluate these situations differently. It is therefore important for individuals with addiction and professionals to understand and respect one another's viewpoints. (Nepustil, 2020; 2021; Heddrick, Hartwoll, 2021; Mardani et al., 2023). This study opens several avenues for further research that may deepen our understanding of alcohol dependence emerging during maternity and parental leave. First, it would be valuable to conduct a quantitative survey exploring how family members—partners, parents, and close relatives—perceive addiction within this specific context. Such a survey could help identify common patterns of interpretation, family dynamics that may contribute to or mitigate the development of dependence, and the types of support family members consider most effective. Another promising direction involves focusing

on the long-term consequences of early-onset parental alcohol dependence. Conducting semi-structured interviews with adult children whose parents developed alcohol dependence shortly after their birth could provide a unique retrospective perspective. Their narratives may shed light on how parental addiction influenced their emotional development, attachment experiences, sense of safety, and later life trajectories. These insights could enrich current knowledge of intergenerational impacts and inform preventive interventions aimed at families with infants and young children. Future research could also explore differences between mothers who developed alcohol dependence during maternity or parental leave and those whose dependence emerged in other life stages. Comparative qualitative or mixed-methods research might reveal distinct risk factors, coping mechanisms, and social pressures associated with early parenthood. Finally, it may be beneficial to investigate the role of health and social care professionals in identifying early warning signs of problematic alcohol use during maternity and parental leave. Understanding the barriers and facilitators that professionals encounter could contribute to improved screening practices and more tailored support for this vulnerable population.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to describe, from the perspective of individuals who developed alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave, the role that medication plays in maintaining abstinence and to formulate proposals for social work with this target group. Both components of the objective were successfully achieved. The respective roles were thoroughly described, providing a clear conceptual understanding of their functions and interrelations. Furthermore, a set of well-grounded recommendations was developed, reflecting the findings of the analysis and offering practical guidance for future research and practice.

From the perspective of individuals who developed alcohol dependence during maternity/parental leave, medication plays three roles: (1) craving-reducing medicines as supportive scaffolding in early abstinence; (2) craving-reducing medicines perceived by some as a sign of personal failure; and (3) antidepressants/anxiolytics as support of managing mental distress. These roles were illustrated with participants' quotations. Understanding clients' perceptions of medication is important for social/clinical social practice; accordingly, we formulated recommendations for social/clinical social workers working with this population.

As noted above, these recommendations are concise and straightforward. They represent suggestions that each social worker and clinical social worker must adapt to their own professional approach, their clients, and the broader context of the cases they handle. Nevertheless, we consider these recommendations important, as they may serve as inspiration for social and clinical social workers and may stimulate discussion within multidisciplinary teams, as well as dialogue with clients and their families on the use of medication in addiction treatment.

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Carmen Marcela Ciornei: **Social Welfare for Older Persons in Post-Communist Romania.** Bucharest: Pro Universitaria Publishing House, 2025

The book *"Social Welfare for Older Persons in Post-Communist Romania"*, written by Carmen Marcela Ciornei, was published at Pro Universitaria Publishing House in 2025.

Given the current context of accelerated population-aging in Romania, this book brings to the forefront the analysis of current social policies, social services for the elderly, and models of good practices for this category of beneficiaries.

The book is structured in two main parts, each focusing on a defining element of vulnerable elderly people in Romania. The first part is entitled *"Old Age: Conceptual Dimensions, Needs and Social Protection"* and is composed of five chapters that address scientific concepts used by specialists when referring to the elderly, needs and vulnerabilities faced by the elderly in Romania, theoretical foundations of elderly care, the ethics of the social worker profession in working with the elderly and, last but not least, elements related to the abuse and neglect of the elderly. The second part of the book is entitled *"Social Policies and the Legislative Framework in the Field of Elderly Care"* and brings to the reader's attention the existing legislative and institutional architecture in Romania, the dynamics of social policies between 1990 and 2025 addressed to the elderly, the importance of informal care and informal caregivers provided for in the legislation in force compared to European reference models, as well as the identification and assessment of the needs of the elderly, along with the planning of long-term care services within an exhaustive community approach.

The relevant elements that caught our attention in the first part of the book are those that refer to *"Another perspective on aging"* where the third age stage is considered to be *"a conceptual reconfiguration: the elderly person is not just a beneficiary of services, but a person who can create, transmit, decide and feel the simple joy of being"* (Ciornei, 2025:32). The vision is also presented according to which different professional categories of specialists (doctors, teachers, lawyers, accountants) who have retired continue their activity in various forms (volunteering, consulting, internship, social involvement, coaching). Thus, they were able to outline *"an alternative image of aging: not as a form of passive withdrawal, but as another way of being present, slower, but more attentive, more profound"* (Ibid).

With the same professionalism, the *"Professional Ethics and Competencies in Working with the Elderly"* was approached by the author. In this subchapter, the author presents existing practices in working with the elderly and how specialists have adapted to the needs of the target group. As an example, the method of presenting and obtaining informed consent from the elderly is discussed by *"adapting the language to the beneficiary's ability to understand, explaining the stages of the intervention and allowing sufficient time for decision-making"* (Ibid, 58).

A section in the first part of the book is dedicated to key competencies that a professional working with the elderly is recommended to possess. Among these competencies, we find active listening, observation, clarity in communication, ethical decision-making skills, critical reflection, and resilience in caring for the elderly. All the mentioned competencies assume *"the development of*

a professional awareness attentive to one's own limits, but also to the resources of the team, the community and one's own inner life, issues that are also developed in personal development sessions and continuous professional training" (Ibid, 71).

The last sequence in the first part of the book that should be brought to the public's discussion is the one that refers to *"Intervention methods used in social assistance for elderly people"*. Here, the following intervention methods are presented in great detail and with relevant examples: casework, social group work, reminiscence work, Trauma-Informed Care (TIC), self-management, and active aging. The main idea derived from these models of good practices presented is that the specialist who works in this field of activity knows that he has the role of *"a seeker of appropriate methods and means suitable for a particular client-system at a particular stage of development and in a particular context"* (Ibid, 80).

We would like to bring to the attention of the public the section in the second part of the volume where *"the concrete layers of social reality are addressed, where public policies, care services and the invisible work of those who care configure or limit the framework of the daily life of elderly people"* (Ibid, 95). The evolution of social policies intended for this category of vulnerable people is relevant because it is structured in four stages: 1990–2000, 2000–2014, 2014–2022, and 2022–present. It can be seen that the four stages mentioned by the author do not have a common or repetitive element, for example, periodicity at an exact number of years, but are structured in this way from the perspective of legislative reforms that appeared ad hoc without a pre-established plan for the short, medium, or long term. Each stage had its own particularities and legislative updates. These emerged either as a need for changes in society or as pressure exerted from outside (for example, accession to the European Union and alignment with European legislation).

It is worth noting that all the legislative changes made over the years have aligned *"Romania with international good practices regarding the coordination of community care and support for people at risk of exclusion or institutionalization"* (Ibid, 150). Despite all these updates, it is clear that the realities of contemporary society require the creation of a clear, coherent legislative framework with quality standards for the elderly.

A final relevant element in the second part of the book that is worth highlighting is the one that refers to *"European models of planning services for the elderly"*, where examples of good practices from other European Union states (France, Denmark, and Germany) are discussed. Thus, the reader can compare, analyse, and co-opt and apply, develop, or adapt social services appropriate to contemporary elderly people.

The conclusions section at the end of the book mentions the future directions of action proposed by the author. These are intended to support the elderly and the specialists who work in the field of social assistance with this category of beneficiaries. As mentioned at the end of the book, this scientific endeavour is intended to pave the way for new solutions in a global society where everything changes at a breakneck speed, and flexibility must be the key to the success of quality social services.

We will all reach this stage of life and we must not forget that *"old age is not a burden, but a calling, a mirror, a reminder that we have been carried and that we will need, in turn, to be carried by our own families but also by a state system that is friendly and sensitive to the needs of people rich in years and life experience"* (Ibid, 184).

The volume constitutes a significant contribution of scientific analysis and critical reflection on interventions for the elderly population in Romania. It is distinguished by its conceptual consistency and by its foundation on observations and data from practice. It is also highlighted by the rigor of the historical reconstruction of the normative framework regarding services for the elderly over a period of three and a half decades.

The work is addressed to both practitioners in the field of social assistance and decision-makers at the governmental, academic, and training levels, as well as to those in university training interested in gerontology and the field of social policies for this category of beneficiaries. By combining

conceptual analysis with axiological reflection and with applicative proposals, the volume has the potential to be used as a professional resource within public and private structures in the field. At the same time, it provides the book with authenticity, originality, and added value. Also, contributes significantly to the development of the specialized field intended for the social protection of the elderly.

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"Heat Heroes" — The Importance of Educating Families in Local Communities for Protecting Children Aged 0 to 3 From Heat

Introduction: Social Work and Child Heat Protection

With climate change advancing, heat is already a challenge for society that needs to be addressed at local level. As climate forecasts show a continuing trend of periods of heat in the Rhine Valley, this holds particularly true for Cologne (cf. UBA, 2021a:114). In densely populated urban areas, the effects of heat are exacerbated by the so-called "urban heat island effect" (Luber, McGeehin, 2008:431). While it affects the whole society, not everyone is affected by heat in the same way (cf. WHO, 2021:99). Young children are a group that is especially vulnerable (cf. Anderko et al., 2020:414). Social work plays a key role in solving these transdisciplinary tasks, such as achieving better health promotion and heat prevention.

Theoretical Background: Vulnerability of Young Children to Heat

Young children aged 0 to 3 years are particularly vulnerable to heat: their ability to regulate their body temperature is not yet fully developed and they have an unfavourable ratio of their body surface area to their body mass (compared to older children and adults), which limits the body's ability to dissipate heat (cf. Anderko et al., 2020:414; Böse-O'Reilly et al., 2023:126; Eichinger et al., 2023:115; Holzinger, 2024:205). Due to these physical characteristics, young children are particularly susceptible to heat-related stress, such as sunstroke, heatstroke, or electrolyte imbalances (cf. Helldén et al., 2021:166). This can also lead to serious diseases of the lungs, kidneys, and the cardiovascular system (cf. Böse-O'Reilly et al., 2023:126 f.). A special danger arises from the fact that young children are not yet able to assess heat risks independently and cannot interpret their body's signals correctly. Therefore, they depend on caregivers and their knowledge of heat protection (cf. ibid.; Anderko et al., 2020:415). As children aged 0 to 3 are often not yet integrated into institutional care, their protection depends largely on information available in their families (cf. Stadt Köln, 2025:36). Nevertheless, the question of how to most effectively provide families with the necessary information remains unresolved. Informal and non-formal education settings present a promising opportunity to reach families. These settings can be described as a "process of establishing a subject-world or subject-society relationship" (Sting, 2018:404). Our research project builds on this insight and tests educational settings on playgrounds in the form of differently designed information stands.

Research Methodology: Field Study

Against the backdrop of the central importance of families for the protection of young children against heat, this research project spends 18 months focusing on how families with children aged 0 to 3 years can be addressed and contacted to provide them with the necessary information. Based on the results of the field study, the project aims to develop recommendations for professional social workers as well as municipal employees responsible for heat protection.

In order to address families in a low-threshold manner, an information stand on heat protection for young children was tested at five different playgrounds in a particularly heat-stressed neighbourhood. The field study took place on six dates in July and August 2024, at different times of day (between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.). The six researchers combined the research methods of activating interview techniques and participant observation (cf. Lüttringhaus, Richers, 2003; Schönhagen, 2009). For this purpose, different variations of information stands were set up, which provided information on heat protection for young children and offered giveaways. In addition to the different stand designs, the degree to which families were directly

approached by the researchers on the playground varied. Partly, the researchers actively approached families and opened up conversations on heat protection (high degree of activation). Partly, the researchers chose a passive role and waited for families to approach them (low degree of activation). The combination of differently designed information stands, and conversation techniques resulted in the following four degrees of activation:

- Level of activation 1: Low activation with giveaways
- Level of activation 2: High activation without giveaways
- Level of activation 3: High activation with giveaways
- Level of activation 4: Low activation without giveaways

One part of the research team conducted activating interviews with playground visitors with small children, using a semi-standardized questionnaire with open questions. The interviews' goals were to collect data and to activate the participants: On the one hand, they aimed at collecting data on already existing strategies within the families to deal with heat and how families liked to be provided with new information. On the other hand, the interviews had the goal to sensitize families and empower them in times of climate crisis. The interviews as well as the overall activities on the playground were observed by other members of the research team to see which level of activation showed the best results. The data was then analysed in the form of a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2024) using categories formed deductively and inductively from the material.

Results: Recommendations for Professionals

The results suggest that direct educational outreach in non-formal settings is an effective way to address families with young children. The field study also indicates that a high degree of activation generally generated more contacts and interviews than a low degree of activation. The additional use of giveaways also proved useful, as it motivated many families to visit the information stand, thereby initiating informal conversations. Based on these findings, activation on level 3 defines the best way to reach families with young children. In addition, we recommend the following for the success of heat prevention projects using an information stand:

1. Where and when should the offer take place? Playgrounds offer a suitable setting, as many families with young children use them in their daily lives. This should be used, as it helps to easily reach families in their habitual environment. As our results show, the visitors' interest in the information format increases with the number of people at the playground and with the general level of interest. Therefore, it is recommended to choose crowded playgrounds to enhance the chances of success. As the number of visitors can be influenced by the weather, the day of the week as well as the playground equipment, a certain flexibility of the professionals running the information stand is important. It might be necessary to change the place and time on short notice.
2. How should the information stand be designed to facilitate knowledge transfer? Firstly, child-centred, and child-friendly giveaways that are connected to the topic of heat can enhance the chances to get in contact with the families and start a conversation. Secondly, the information materials should be easy to understand, relevant to everyday life, and attractively designed.
3. How should the target group be addressed in the conversations? The focus here is on a dialogue-based exchange that is closely geared to the everyday needs and circumstances of the families. This is also crucial for the framework of non-formal education, the communication of information and the clarification of the relevance of the topic. In addition, the adults often divided their attention between the conversation and their children's activities. To do justice to this, short, inviting, and continuing conversation prompts in motion are effective for conveying information. Therefore, the professionals are asked not to stick to the information stand but to walk around the playground during the conversation.
4. How can the contact be ended in a positive way? An open offer of (further) information can also be used to address the unknown gaps in the families' knowledge. To bring this discussion to a positive

conclusion, giveaways can help as a final impulse to conclude the knowledge transfer in a positive way and draw attention to heat protection in the long term.

As mentioned above, children in the age of 0 to 3 cannot independently protect themselves from heat. Still, children played a central role in the entire information process, as they were often the first who were attracted by the information stand and they also demanded an active role in the whole conversation. For this reason, the educational offer should not exclusively focus on adults but take even the youngest children seriously by understanding them as clients of non-formal education in the context of heat prevention.

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