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Simulations in Social Work and Geriatrics

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In the training of social work students and in the continuing education of social, mental health and medical professionals there is a wide range of opportunities to use simulation techniques. Simulation can be described as “a pedagogy using a real-world problem in a realistic environment to promote critical thinking, problem solving, and learning” (Nimmagadda & Murphy, 2014: 540). The goal of simulation education is to promote experiential learning, however, during the simulation, we just imitate the real situation. Simulations can be used not only in education and training programs, but they can also be used as tools of social work, for example, they can be suitable for social sensitization.

Why might it be necessary to use simulation techniques in social work education? Because practical opportunities are often limited. „Social work students do not have enough direct practice opportunities in the field, seldom observe field instructors’ practice, and rarely have their own practice observed. This implies that students are not receiving feedback on the extent to which they are demonstrating social work practice competencies.” (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020: 433) In rural areas, there are often not enough social work fieldwork opportunities for students, and they are not always able to experience interactions with specific client groups or to try out different methods, such as group or community work ([http1](#)). In such situations, the simulations help to ensure that all students have the opportunity to gain experience, receive appropriate feedback, and encounter special situations. By participating in social work simulations, students could get more practice, develop their skills, receive feedback, and become confident and competent even before they meet real clients (Sunarich & Rowan, 2017).

There are many types of simulation used in professional education. The use of mannequins is widespread in medical education ([http1](#)) and also in geriatric care, it helps to prepare nurses, residents, and social workers for the care of the elderly. Standardized patients or clients are the most common simulation, during which, similar to classic role-playing games, a trained actor or volunteer presents a specific client situation in a standardized way. Simulation experiences are often based on real-life cases ([http1](#)). At the University of Toronto, this method has been used since 2015 in the so-called Practice Fridays. According to their experience, during interviews, students develop greater self-awareness and the ability to manage emotions, as well as learn to give and receive constructive feedback. They become more confident, understand the client's situation and learn to connect theory and practice ([http2](#)). Large-scale multiparticipant situations, such as poverty simulations and reentry simulations, are particularly suitable for sensitizing society and increasing empathy and acceptance, as they mimic how social problems and health issues affect the daily lives of clients. Simulations can also be used in the virtual world with simulators or computer programs ([http1](#)). The COVID-19 epidemic situation was a new challenge, in which it was very often difficult to hold field practices and contact with clients, which is why some universities started using simulations, ensuring virtual field practice. For instance, the University of New England has introduced the Simulation and On-Site (SOS) model of field education, in which they support students in developing long-lasting foundational social work skills ([http3](#)).

Simulation methods can also be used in the field of social work with the elderly and geriatrics (Powers & Ross, 2019; Eost-Telling et al., 2021; Hernández-López et al. 2023; Smith et al., 2023). In the lecture, examples and good practices will be presented, such as: the use of age suits and age simulation equipment, older adults as simulated participants, simulation learning and training exercises and programs, an empathy lab, dementia simulations and an aging “escape room”.

The main topic of the 2024 Gerontological Days Conference is cooperation, and in connection with this, at the end of the presentation, we will discuss how important interdisciplinary cooperation is in creating social work and geriatric simulations. Of course, it is not only about the cooperation of educators, medical, mental health and social professionals, but depending on the type of simulation, the knowledge and participation of engineers, IT specialists, actors, artists, designers, communication and marketing specialists can also be essential for success.

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