• **Type of contribution:** Paper

• **Title:** Social justice in the narratives of (CG) practitioners – an absent, empty or floating signifier? A few remarks on research difficulties

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• **Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to present some of the research findings from the project conducted in Poland. The project was focused on career guidance (and social work) practitioners and their perception of social justice. The qualitative methods were used. The paper will present the results from the perspective of E. Laclau’s concepts of the empty or floating signifier. The Author also stresses the issue of the absence of the idea of social justice in daily practices. As a result, a few remarks on research on social justice will be presented, together with some recommendations.

**Keywords:** social justice, signifier, CG practitioners, research

• **Relation to the conference theme:** The paper raises the issue of social justice perception among practitioners and the difficulties that appear in (qualitative) research. The results of the presented project indicate that research on social justice can be complex and requires a carefulness at each stage.

• **General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework:** Since one can observe the particular renewal of interests in social justice concepts caused partially by the global disappointment at (social) inequalities, neoliberal paradigms, populisims etc. the attempts to adjust the social justice concepts to empirical research are more visible as well. As many researchers pointed out the idea of justice is not only difficult to express (e.g. Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018) but also (sometimes) unworthy to be analysed since it can be only the utopian state of the art (Sen, 2009). In the context of the vivid analytical discussion, it seems to be worth knowing better the concepts of social justice anchored in the daily practices of CG practitioners (as well the social workers). This group participated in the research project conducted in Poland. One of the aims of the project was to analyse the perception of social justice. The project aimed at answering the following (general) questions: How is the concept of social justice perceived among Polish CG practitioners, and social workers as well? Is the concept of social justice present in the daily activities of Polish CG practitioners? What kinds of theoretical assumptions can be identified as a background for CG practitioners concepts of social justice? The project assumed that people develop personal constructs about the world (Kelly, 1991), including
the social justice construct. However, the non-discursive consciousness and nature of acting (Giddens, 1984) were also considered in the project which meant that at the analytical project’s stage some of the statements were classified as social justice-related even though they did not express directly this concept. It also meant that the researcher is aware that the absence of the social justice concept in the narrative doesn’t mean that this concept is absent in the practice. As a result, the opinions/statements related to such categories as values, moral obligations, political solutions etc. were also analysed as social justice-related.

The data was analysed from the E. Laclau’s perspective, namely the assumption of the discursive nature of reality. Additionally, the concepts of empty and floating signifiers were used to stress the fact that it is extremally difficult to analyse and reconstruct the practitioners’ constructions of social justice as they are anchored in various theoretical traditions or are just absent in the narratives. For Laclau, there are two types of signifiers: empty and floating. An empty signer is one that tries to sever its relationship with any meaning in order to represent a heterogeneous field. Its universality requires it to renounce a precise content. A floating signer is one that can link up with a variety of concrete projects. Then, because it moves between projects, it is not empty: it is floating (Laclau, 2007). Social justice becomes then the empty (or floating) signer that can be filled out with various meanings, even the contradictory ones.

**Methods/methodology:** The qualitative methods were used in the project. 15 practitioners agreed to participate in the semi-structured (narrative) interviews. The purposeful sampling was used. The sampling criteria were as follows: place of work, age, gender, geographical location of an institution (city, town, village), types of activity, position within the institution. It was important to collect various narratives. In the project, there were used two types of coding: a) coding based on theory (Saldaña, 2013) was used in the analytical stages of the project based on some social justice theories (Nancy Fraser, Robert Nozick, Amartya Sen) chosen to identify the different approaches, dimensions and “types” of social justice narratives b) evaluation coding (Saldaña, 2013). Coding process was organized in three cycles.

**Outcomes:** Research on the perception of social justice turned out to be extremally difficult on each level and stage. Therefore, the concepts of empty or floating signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) were adopted to stress that in the narratives collected, there were various concepts, ideas, values assigned to “social justice concept” by practitioners. Additionally, social justice turned out to be an absent concept – practitioners tend to avoid the discussion
about social justice, show the discomfort while being asked about justice and even change the topics. Therefore, a few remarks emerged after the research project:

a) research on social justice requires a solid theoretical background so that to shift/deal with the various practitioners’ concepts that are not theoretically grounded. Social justice concept need to be “reconstructed and redefined” from mosaics of values, attitudes etc.;

b) interview scenario/structure should be flexible, especially if we do not want to impose the values, language or concepts on people;

c) to understand the practitioner’s concepts of social justice we need to understand the cultural, historical, political and ideological impacts on society (e.g. in Poland, there is a visible reluctance on some part of the society to talk about “social values” because of the socialism era), including educational impacts (to what extent CG practitioners represent neoliberal concepts of social justice and why?)

d) the discrepancy between the theoretical (critical) discourse and practice should be better understood, including the role of education in that.

References:


