



PERSPECTIVES ON ROMANIAN SOCIAL WORKERS' DEONTOLOGICAL STANDARDS

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Abstract: *Our goal in this research is to examine the content and governance of the ethical and deontological standards specific to social assistance. The social worker, through his conducted activity, represents a key element in the smooth running of any society. The most vulnerable social categories of people permanently need, or at least in certain periods of their existence, the professionalism and expertise of social workers to survive and overcome major problems that endanger their lives, physical and mental integrity, as well as the exercise of fundamental rights. In the first part of the paper, we referred to the notion of the social worker, his mission, and his duties in general. In the second part of the paper, we analyzed the legislation applicable to the social worker profession in Romania. Finally, we presented the content of the deontological norms specific to the social worker profession according to the national legislation.*

Keywords: *social workers; ethics; professional deontology; legal frame; social innovation; fundamental human rights.*

1. Introduction

Social worker's mission in contemporary society is very important as it represents a mean to protect and guide those people whom, because of their young age, too old age, mental illness or other type of health problems, are not able to take care of themselves or protect themselves against abuse.

It takes both knowledge and courage to solve any social case because the hard times and the tragedies which strike vulnerable people are not easy to be dealt with.

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According to one complex and complete definition approved in 2014 by the International Federation of Social Workers, the social work is “a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.” (International Federation of Social Workers, <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>).

In the contemporary civilization, the respect and the attention given to human rights and well-being are stronger than ever before. It is true that no social life is ideal, and still a percent of the population suffers deeply and lives in poor condition, but the whole system and legislation recognize and protect, well-being and punishes abuses of anykind.

2. International Standards and Deontological Principles in Social Work

Social work is a profoundly altruistic line of work. Those who embrace it need to have a special calling because they are in charge of helping the helpless and, many times, the state/city/village financial resources are not sufficient for all the social cases. They need to be also working with foundations and all sorts of organizations dedicated to helping children, elder people and so on. They need to be able to find, sometimes in a very short period of time, solutions for relocating abuse victims, to counsel and help them. Many times the available places are insufficient and the social worker has to make hard and fast decision. Also, they should have to be psychically strong as they face severe abuse, neglect and trauma.

In their work, they must respect the dignity of all humans, the diversity of people and families. The main goal of social work is to respect and achieve the principles of the social justice. Human rights can not possibly be protected if the society and the authorities are not envolved actively. Vulnerable people and families can, many times, differ from the majority of the population (although this is obviously not necessary) and have special needs. The social worker enters their homes and must respect their way of life, dignity, but also for their customs and believes (as long as these believes do not involve abuse or other crimes).

The social worker’s mission in society lies “in the profession’s venerable commitment to assisting individuals who struggle in life and, simultaneously, addressing public policy and structural issues that harm individuals and compromise their quality of life.” (Reamer F. 2024, p. 48).

According to the NASW Code of Ethics, one of the main goals of the social workers is to help the people in need and to make the society aware of the problems that some groups or individuals have, in order to be able to provide help for those problems (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021). Some of the problems, such as child abuse, are very well-known, but others, such as social problems caused by migration or war, are less known and need new solutions. One of the social worker's important missions is to raise awareness about the new issues or problems that he/she encounters in his/her work.

Every person has value and deserves respect for their dignity. No matter how poor, unaware, vulnerable they are, the social worker needs to treat them equally and to make the same effort in order to solve their problems. Social workers must assess one's ability to understand, change and evolve and be able to find proper solutions for every one. This takes a lot of empathy and understanding for those in need. There is not only one type of solutions. The solutions must be fit for every individual.

In their work, "social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021). This is another important ethical principle in social work. Human relationships are very important as they link every individual to the society and to each other. Nobody can live alienated from every one (unless they are severely mentally ill or convicted for very serious crimes). Social workers are taught that people in difficult situations are able to change and have a better quality of life, if they have some good and reliable relationships. So, in order to be able to help an individual they work with people as partners. "Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities." (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021).

Social workers show themselves as trustworthy people. Those who are handled by them need to feel that they are responsible and reliable. Social workers must be competent, well prepared professionally and use properly their knowledge and professional expertise. They should constantly improve their professional skills.

In the exercise of their profession social workers have ethical responsibilities to their clients, to their colleagues, to their practice and their profession and, also, to society in general.

In regard to their clients, they must be committed, they must respect their clients self-determination and let them make choices whenever this is possible and if it does not contradict their best interests. "Social workers may limit clients' right to self-determination when, in the social workers' professional judgment, clients' actions

or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others.” (NASW Code of Ethics: Ethical Standards, 2021).

For the measures that need to be taken, the social worker must obtain the informed consent of the client or of the client representative. The services provided by the social worker must have a professional base and, if needed the social worker must obtain a valid informed consent. A valid informed consent implies that the situation is well understood by the client, it was explained in terms that she/he are able to understand. The understanding of the client must include the content of the service, the limits of it and its possible outcomes, costs, alternative, the right to refuse a certain service and the necessary period of time required.

Also, in order to record conversations with the client, the social worker has to obtain the client’s valid informed consent.

In their professional activities, the social worker must show competence: proper skills, knowledge, communication strategies and so on.

Also, it is very important for the social worker to understand the values and beliefs of his/her clients. According to Standard 1.05 from the NASW Code of ethics, paragraph (b) “Social workers should demonstrate knowledge that guides practice with clients of various cultures and be able to demonstrate skills in the provision of culturally informed services that empower marginalized individuals and groups. Social workers must take action against oppression, racism, discrimination, and inequities, and acknowledge personal privilege.” ((NASW Code of Ethics: Ethical Standards, 2021)

The social worker must be aware of the conflicts of interest situation and, whenever such conflict occurs, he/she should announce the client, the hierarchic superior and, if needed, ask for the case to be given to another colleague. Furthermore, due to the delicate nature of the provided services, the social worker has the obligation of confidentiality and to not disclose private information to any third party unless they are allowed to.

As a rule, the clients are allowed to have access to their case records, this access can be restricted only if, the access would cause misunderstandings and harm the client.

Sexual contact with the clients is totally forbidden and, also, the physical contact must be appropriate, according to the client’s cultural and social values, limited and not to generate any misinterpretation.

3. Deontological Standards and Principles of Social Work in Romania

In Romania, the professional activity of the social worker is regulated by the Law no. 466/2004 regarding the legal status of the social worker. According to the Article 7 of this law, the social worker must be a Romanian or foreign citizen, with no prior criminal convictions related to the social worker profession, with studies in the field and who is registered in the National Register of the Romanian Social Workers. The ethical principles of the social worker in Romania are enshrined in the Chapter III, articles 19-25 of the Law no. 466/2004.

The first principle, stated in article 19 of Law nr. 466/2004 states that the mission of the social worker is to assist persons and communities in need, by identifying, understanding, evaluating and solving the problems in his/her area of expertise. Just like the international norms, the national ruling states the social worker mission of identifying social problems and raising social awareness in regard with those difficult situations.

The second principle, enshrined by art. 20 of Law nr. 466/2004 refers to the obligation of the social worker to promote the social justice, in relation to their line of work. Furthermore, they have to insure equality of chances of the assisted persons (clients) in regard to the access to information, services provided, resources, decision making processes.

The third principle provides that, all social worker must respect the dignity of their clients and the human value of each person. It is strictly forbidden for the social workers to practice, tolerate, accept any form of discrimination of their clients (based on gender, religion, marital status, mental or physical defficiency or any other criteria).

Beyond solving the client's pressing problems, according to article 22 of the Law no. 466/2004 the social worker must provide support for the clients in order for the to identify and clarify their purposes. The main scope of these obligation is to raise awareness in the assisted person's mind of how he/she could improve their life, achieve well-being, health, commodities, get read of addictions and so on. If the individual purpose is not clear and accepted by the client, the outcome of the measures taken and of the effort will, most likely, not lead to success. And the social worker's and client's efforts will probably be in vain.

The main objective of the social worker professional activity, enshired by article 23 of Law no. 466/2004 is to promote, to redo, maintain or improve the client's quality

of life. This includes the personal well being, the improvement of family life and family relationships, the life of organizations and communities.

Also, the social workers, must complete their professional work with honesty and responsibility for their clients and the human communities and also, they have to respect the deontological norms of their preofesion (article 24 of Law no.466/2004).

Last, but not least, the social worker must fulfill their professional obligations within their professional competences. Also, like all professional they must constantly improve their skills by taking classes, attending conferences and obtain all sorts of other professional qualifications. As the society is constantly changing they must be ready to face new challenges, be able to communicate with new groups of people and attend any new social needs which may arise.

The Deontological Code of the Romanian Social Worker entered into force in 2008 and it established the deontological obligations of the social workers members of the National College of Social Workers of Romania, which basically means all the social workers practicing legally in Romania. According to this Code, the social workers have the following obligations: in the exercise of their profession the social workers must respect the law (legality principle), professional values and they have to constantly improve their professional skills.

The social workers are independent in their work, they have to always have in mind the best interest of their clients, to make sure that all the assisted persons get to have a satisfying level of life, access to education, financial support, medical assistance and so on (all the conditions implied by the principle of social justice). They should make sure that the clients have access to proper services, that the vulnerable are being protected, the human dignity is respected, the problems are known by the society and that there are mechanisms to solve them, that no discrimination is permitted etc. (articles 8-31 of the Deontological Code). Mainly, the most important obligations of the social worker are in regard to the assisted persons.

Practically, the professional obligations of the Romanian social workers are identical to those enshrined by the international norms, this aspect showing that this profession is well regulated in Romania and, that the Romanian social workers have the same standards for their practice and do their colleagues all over the world.

The National College of Social Workers of Romania is updated to the national, European and international realities and even though the social worker's practice differ from country to country, region to region, as they are adapted to the problems which actually occur, the standards are general and international.

4. Conclusion

The social work is a line of work relatively new, but which gained its place in the contemporary societies. Everywhere, in each country or community are vulnerable people, people in need, abandoned or abused children, mentally ill adults, addicted, homeless people whom are not able to help themselves, to improve their lives alone. Professional help in solving these problems is seriously needed and social workers provide that, each one in their community. Day after day their skills are improving and, when a new way to help the vulnerable is found it is very probable that social workers noticed that problem and tried to provide a solutions. It is clear that more social workers are needed in all countries, their practice being the root of constant improvement of the quality of life and well-being of many individuals, families and communities.

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