

THE SOCIAL WORKER-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP: DIFFICULTIES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: *The social worker-client relationship is a construction that depends on both parties. Difficulties that may arise support the importance of assertive communication and maintaining professional boundaries. In rural areas, specific problems (such as lack of resources, administrative tasks /clearly undefined roles, difficult to maintain confidentiality, etc.) make the mission of the social worker even more difficult. Understanding the contextual factors by the social worker, professionally managing the relationship with the client, efficient time and stress management, the balance between professional and personal life are essential and must be supplemented with measures from the organization (avoiding overloading, supervision and support and training).*

Key words: *social worker-client relationship, difficulties, communication, limits.*

1. Introduction

Based on interaction and communication, social work involves building a social worker-client relationship, the quality and results of which depend largely on the success of the care process.

In social work, the social worker's relations with clients can “bring”: their past experiences, vulnerabilities, traumas, failures, emotions, attachments. The social worker must find the appropriate way of communication, behavior towards the client, so as to build a “healthy” professional relationship and manage it in accordance with professional values. The social worker-client relationship “comprises a mixture of the instrumental and the moral”, the social workers being “necessarily practitioners of context-sensitive moral values and bearers of particular moral character” (Clark, 2006, p. 80, 86). Given the specificity of the intervention in social work, in order to maintain objectivity and protect against the occurrence of situations involving potential personal, sexual, financial or other conflicts, it was necessary to impose a “professional distance”,

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which presupposes certain professional boundaries, values and ethical principles in the social worker-client relationship (O'Leary, Tsui, and Ruch, 2013, p. 137; Reamer, 2003). Codes of conduct, ethics, regulations, practices of social workers aim to reflect the profession's interest, organizational needs, the provision of efficient and ethical social services (Alexander and Charles, 2009).

The paper presents some relevant aspects of the social worker-client (beneficiary) relationship, focusing in particular on the difficulties encountered and possible solutions, taking into account both the results of specialized studies and the professional experience of the authors.

2. Theoretical and practical aspects of the social worker-client relationship

The social worker-client relationship is a construction that depends on both sides, as it implies reciprocity (Alexander and Charles, 2009). On the part of the social worker it involves, besides the care for the client, empathy, professionalism, and the proper management of the difficulties that have arisen. The basis of the relationships between the professional service provider and the client is trust. When service providers and clients have gained trust in each other, professional relationships evolve. Bagdoniene and Jakstaite identify (2009) four dimensions of trust, important for the development of long-term professional relationships, namely: pre-relationship, exploratory, developing and stable stage and trust, the most desirable being developing and stable levels, where trust is high.

The identification of the challenges that social workers face in their activity brings to their attention the influence that those issues have on the relationship of the social worker with the clients, the time given to solving the difficulties, their impact on the social worker (increasing the emotional "load", stress, lack of motivation, etc.). The first nationally representative research on the situation of social workers in Romania (Lazăr, Dégi, and Iovu, 2016) revealed some of the main concerns: the high number of cases and their complexity/severity and issues related to personal safety at work. From the latter perspective, women present significantly more vulnerabilities. Many of the professionals have stated that they deal with administrative or secretarial activities, which are not related to the occupation of social worker, but are assigned on the basis of lack of staff. More than half of the social workers included in the research appreciated that they benefit from respect/support for the social work services provided within the institution and that they receive and /or offer assistance on various ethical issues in the workplace.

During the intervention process, communication plays an essential role, constituting perhaps the most important skill of the social worker, necessary in developing the relationship between social worker and client. Obtaining information for identifying the problems/needs the client is facing and establishing specific ways of intervention depending on the quality of communication. Communication in this framework is a complex process that involves skills such as: active listening, emotional control etc. (Obi-keguna, Agbawodikeizu, and Uche, 2017).

In some situations, despite the efforts made by social workers to communicate adequately and efficiently, the results of studies indicate the reluctant, even hostile attitude of some clients and their families, their refusal to cooperate with authorities, even the manifestation of aggressive behavior, verbal and physical (Oşvat and Marc, 2014; Marc, Bacter, and Timofte, 2018). Client aggression is a source of stress for the social worker and it has implications not only for the social worker, but also for the organization/institution he/she is a part of (Enosh, Tzafir, and Gur, 2012). For adequately managing these situations, the social worker has to act with calm, respect and empathy. Thus, calm, respectful behavior, listening to the client, reminding to the client the social worker's helping role, showing compassion, establishing and maintaining boundaries are essential particularly while encountering problematic situations (National Association of Social Workers, 2013).

Assertiveness is a necessary skill for fulfilling the role of social worker, for clear and efficient communication, for identifying problems and expressing firm solutions and for maintaining boundaries. In Erbay and Akçay's (2013) opinion, the assertiveness of the social workers is not limited to being social and communicating easily with everyone, but implies consciousness, self-awareness, empathy towards the others' feelings, expressing their thoughts, needs, demands in an appropriate way while respecting their own and the others rights. Art. 30 of the Code of ethics of the profession of social worker, adopted by The National College of Social Workers of Romania, regulates the obligation of the social worker to use an adequate and respectful language towards the client and to avoid using the terms that may harm persons, groups or communities (National College of Romanian Social Workers, 2008).

It is a very sensitive line between the social worker's openness towards the client and how far he/she can go in this relationship. Establishing and maintaining boundaries in social work is essential and it aims to protect social workers, clients and the organization they work for and avoid emotional stress. Many of the limitations imposed on professional behavior contribute to the development of a "safe, open, stable, transparent relationship that is clearly based on the client's needs" (Cooper, 2012, p. 30). The lack of experience of the social workers but also their excessive involvement can lead to violation of professional boundaries. Problems also arise in the case of dual or multiple relationships with the client, in which social workers interact with client in a separate, distinct form from the professional one (Trimberger, 2012). The social worker must understand the difference between the professional and personal relationships, behave professionally with the clients, identify the "danger" and take the necessary measures. Cooper (2012) considers that there are "high-risk situations", where the risk that the limits are violated by the client or the social worker is higher, such as: the social worker identifies with clients' issues; strong feelings, emotions (caused to the social worker by the story of the client); personal issues, fatigue/stress, overworked social worker; frustrated/difficult clients; likeable clients (if the social worker relaxes too much and assumes everything will be easy); attractive clients; manipulative clients; accidental meeting with client, outside of work; non-standard work environment; signs of attachment/ dependence on the part of the client.

Critically analyzing the concerns about the limits that are imposed in the social worker-client relationship, Dietz and Thompson show that certain factors, such as personal and professional ones, ethics and values, legal regulations, theories on practice, etc. can generate abuses of power in social work. These abuses can be controlled by equalizing the power between social workers and clients, and “the keys to safe connection have empathy, connection, collaboration and accountability”, so that the practice of social workers is “ethical and empowering” (Dietz and Thompson, 2004, pp. 20-21). Workers who operate in a “balanced” manner, maintain clear boundaries, are genuine and attentive, use judgmental skills and make responsible professional decisions, properly use authority and maintain the position of power, while respecting the rights of clients and not exploiting their vulnerabilities (Davidson, 2005, p. 519). All these further humanize the intervention process; increase the active involvement of the clients, their dignity and their degree of autonomy (O’Leary, Tsui, and Ruch, 2013).

The specificity of the intervention in the services of the rural communities is slightly different due to the informal relations and the wide social networks, which can create dilemmas for social workers and clients regarding professional role and personal life (Pugh and Cheers, 2010). For example, in rural communities access to information about professionals and clients is easy. They can also interact more easily outside the services by being involved in the lives of the communities they belong to. Moreover, especially in small communities, it is expected that “daily life is conducted in a friendly way and is thus much less narrowly circumscribed by a neutral, ‘professional’ style of engagement” (Pugh, 2007, p. 1406).

In rural areas, social workers “need to be multi-skilled. They have to be able to do everything” (Schenk, 2004, p. 166). In the same note, Alexiu and Anastasoaei (2001) show that, in order to be able to handle it, social workers from small communities must know a little in all areas. In addition, other problems are: lack of infrastructure and resources; lack of supervision/support from the organization; some social workers feel responsible for problems in the community that have not been solved by the leaders and institutions; maintaining confidentiality (caused, for example, by: disseminating information in the community about those who ask for help, the lack of a place where the social worker talks with the client or the sharing of the office with other officials); drawing boundaries (Alexiu and Anastasoaei, 2001; Schenk, 2004).

Riebschleger (2007), in an exploratory study in which social workers from rural communities participated, summarizes some relevant aspects pointed out by the experts with experience in the activity in these communities. The author begins with presenting the image of people from the rural areas, who are considered to be complex, with many unique cultures and connections and with a great influence on the social and economic environment. Considering their peculiarities, the author thus states that it is important for the intervention to be based on understanding that everything is connected and that it is necessary to manage intersecting roles, using relationships to generate change, generalist practice skills, cultural competency skills, flexibility and innovation. Re-thinking the boundaries in terms of increasing flexibility regarding dual relationships “is based on the needs of the practitioner to live a normal integrated life within small rural and remote communities” (Alexander and Charles, 2009).

Many of the issues listed above appear and reappear in the discourses and debates of social workers, in informal discussions or in different professional events. Thus, following the questions raised in some workshops (organized in May and November 2018, in Oradea, with national participation (a number of 28, respectively 35 participants), by the Association Caritas Eparhial Oradea in collaboration with The National College of Social Workers of Romania, Bihor branch; facilitated by Judit Makai Dimény), with topics such as "Relationship of the social worker with the beneficiaries - debut, evolution, conclusion", respectively "Efficiency and satisfaction in the work of the social worker - The social worker, bridge between beneficiaries and organization, the roles and resources of the social worker", we have been made aware of the need to organize a longer-term training program for social workers, to provide the time and framework needed to seek answers or ask new questions. The debates, the individual and joint analyzes and the accumulation of knowledge focused on: applying the working standards in the work with the beneficiaries; building, maintaining and ending the social worker-client relationship; involvement of the social worker; addressing conflict situations; measuring the success of the intervention; the satisfaction of the client and the social worker; clarity of roles; the importance of communication; the efficiency of communication with the clients and the success of the relationship.

Of course, neither these workshops, nor the training program designed as a result of them (and from which we will highlight some aspects in the next sequences of the article) were neither the first, nor the last of this kind, the social worker-client relationship being a theme of permanent news, an open topic, in which almost all the dilemmas of the profession are manifested and after each discussion many questions remain.

In the following sequence, we will refer to some practical aspects, highlighted in some social worker training activities, supported by one of the authors: Two workshops of two days (in total 40 hours), in Satu Mare in the organization of the Caritas of the Diocese of Satu Mare, in collaboration with the Satu Mare branch of The National College of Social Workers of Romania (organized as part of a Caritas project, focused on the development and integration of marginalized communities) supported by trainer Judit Makai Dimény, in November 2018 and January 2019, attended by 22 social workers from Satu Mare county, of which 10 from the rural municipalities. These were aimed at facilitating and improving the relationship with the beneficiaries, through the perspective of experiential learning, aiming to highlight: the role of assertive and affective communication during the intervention process in social work; the place and role of the social worker in community work, respectively the place and role of detailed assessment in the social worker interventions, as well as the resources and limits of the social worker-client relationship. In addition to the aforementioned objectives, the complementary aim of the training program was to develop the relations between professionals in the field, facilitating the exchange of experience, taking into account the development of professional autonomy and self-confidence.

The training program was designed on an experiential basis, so that the relationship between participants, respectively between the trainer and participants, follow the same process through which the construction of the social worker-client relationship

during the intervention goes: building the relationship (the beginning), the evolution (maintaining the relationship) and ending it. It started from the first contact, then “contracting” (both in a formal and relational sense), the evolution of the relationship (depending on the interventions and services provided, the actual practice of the participating social workers), the different unexpected situations or emergencies involved and the termination of the relationship. Throughout this process, the time and space for reflections were ensured, and, consequently, the similarities between the experiences of the training program and the daily activity of the participants were observed.

Creating the necessary framework for social workers to discuss the dilemmas they face in everyday work and to share good practices, issues were addressed such as: the importance of the awareness process and self-reflection; the needs of beneficiaries and social workers - identification, awareness and expression of needs; providing feedback; communication bottlenecks; exercises of affective communication; self-reflection exercises; the social skills needed for the social worker in community work; understanding the psychological emotions and phenomena behind the beneficiaries' behaviors and identifying and leveraging resources.

During the sessions, participants indicated several issues they were concerned about. One of these, is the difficulty in dealing with beneficiaries/or resistance from them, which is manifested in aggressive behavior, verbal attack on the social system, or failure to comply with limits and rules. Another is the lack of both the private space of the social worker (not having a separate office, e.g. in the town halls being in the same office or with the ones from the agricultural register, or with the accounting or the secretarial department), as well as the space needed for discussions with/counseling of the clients. Social workers also referred to their vulnerability during the visits to the beneficiaries' homes. Another concern of the participants is the “loneliness” of social worker, especially that of those in the rural area, who have no one to share with the situations or dilemmas they face in their activity. Also, social workers (especially from the rural area) showed that they felt as if they were the interface of the City Hall, the “shield” that should defend the mayor and the local councilors against the “invasion” of the needy, the “defender” who defends not the beneficiaries, but the institution of beneficiaries, a hypostasis that they consider tough and depressing. They also expressed the difficulty of the role of “filter”, both in the meaning presented above and also in the contradiction of situations, when the client's requests must be rejected, but the same client must be “convinced” to enroll in a program offered by the institution. Social workers employed in the public institutions from the rural area also referred to the difficulty of serving the management, of carrying out additional tasks received from the superiors mayor (e.g. secretarial, purchasing, etc.) that reduce the time allotted to the field activity or the time necessary for the relationship with the beneficiaries. The social workers from the non-governmental organizations expressed the difficulty of correlating the activities within the programs financed with the direct needs of beneficiaries.

But in order to be able to highlight that parallelism we mentioned earlier, we will briefly refer to the structure of the training program. Upon arrival, the participants were welcomed in a room with the seats arranged in a circle, sufficient time was given to

accommodate the space, find comfort, and at the presentation a positive climate was created and the order of the circle was kept, which allowed both equal attention given to each one, as well as the predictability of the order. In the process of knowledge, groups of four and the whole group have developed progressively from meetings in two. To the surprise of the participants (and initially, also their resistance, because they did not understand, if a theme was established, about which they were informed and why they were asked to express their expectations), they were given time to clarify expectations, needs to each one, and therefore, in addition to the similarities, the differences between them were also outlined. The personal experience from this moment of the training program has shown that a simple information about something that awaits or is about to happen to them is not enough, even in the case of the relationship with the clients. Besides information, it is also important to prepare them, it is necessary to check how they understood the information, respectively to ensure the space necessary to express reactions and emotions. Also, in this phase there was clarification regarding the content and the expectations expressed by the participants which may or may not respond to the program. In fact, the fair process, of which three principles are: *“engagement* - involving individuals in decisions that affect them by listening to their views and genuinely taking their opinions into account; *explanation* - explaining the reasoning behind a decision to everyone who has been involved in it or who is affected by it; *expectation clarity* - making sure that everyone clearly understands a decision and what is expected of them in the future” (Kim and Mauborgne, 1997 apud Wachtel, 2013, p. 6).

This theme of the needs and expectations of the clients reappeared later in the program, the participants being aware of the “trap” in which they get caught, when overwhelmed by the multitude and complexity of the beneficiaries' needs and the desire to provide their help, they feel helpless and sometimes stuck in the clarifications of the situations (under what conditions, who, why services or aids can /cannot benefit) and because of this frustration, they become, unconsciously, offensive to the beneficiaries. Also, in such situations, the clients, too, easily become ostentatious /aggressive.

The exercises of affective communication and the offer of direct feedback and the exercises of mutual leadership seemed most difficult to participants. From the perspective of the theme addressed in this article, the exercises aimed at processing the concrete cases and situations had the greatest impact on the participants. They realized, after the exercises, that the attitude of some clients is not “addressed”/ “intended” only to social workers, as they considered them, but the reactions of the beneficiaries “are drawn” from their reality.

From the conclusions of the participants, we can highlight the following: in those cases, when the social worker-beneficiaries relationship was well founded, the clients worked more constructively with the social worker, and a desire to put in more effort, to mobilize for change was built on the background of a good relationship. Some beneficiaries “compete” for the attention /to be in the good graces of the social worker (having the “I think” it is wrong that if one receives help, there “will not be enough” for the other), situations in which the application of that fair process is vital, but also requires additional effort from the social worker, overloaded in turn. Another aspect

was the discovery and awareness that social workers neglect their own needs, which creates frustrations that they become aware of (if they do) only later, frustrations that become bottlenecks in communication and relationships.

Regarding needs, in addition to those related to infrastructure (adequate spaces) and resources, participants were aware of the need for reflexivity, for sufficient time to clarify not only the needs of the clients but also their own needs and expectations. They also became aware of the importance of the time required both in the work program and in the training programs for identifying, expressing, awareness and, if necessary, processing emotions, which appeared both in their relationship with the clients, as well as in the relationship with colleagues and superiors.

Another conclusion of the participants was the lack of fixed solutions, applicable in any situation. Thus, solving and/or managing relationships and situations can be based on a conscious presence in situations, on the use of reflection and multi-dimensional perspectives, and on the formulation of new questions, whenever necessary, the most important resource being those colleagues, supervisors and trainers whose presence facilitates the free expression of feelings and emotions.

3. Conclusions

It is important for the relationship of the social worker with the client to be a professional one, based on interaction and collaboration and compliance with a set of rules mutually agreed upon and characteristic of the context. In rural areas, specific issues (such as lack of resources, administrative tasks/clearly undefined roles, difficult to maintain confidentiality, etc.) make the mission of the social worker even more difficult.

Accurate knowledge of one's role, understanding of the contextual factors by the social worker, professionally managing the relationship with the clients, efficient management of time and stress, balance between professional and personal life are essential. Also, teamwork, discussions with colleagues and superiors, reflection, supervision and training help the social worker improve communication and to broaden the perspectives of approaching the relationship with clients (Bacter and Marc, 2017; Marc, Makai-Dimeny, and Oşvat, 2014). The involvement of the organization is very important in order to avoid overloading the social worker with tasks, to provide resources for the activity and the support needed for the social worker.

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