

# BEING SOCIAL WORKER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents the results of qualitative research on the work of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected by applying an interview guide, to which 18 social workers responded. The results of the research, interpreted through storytelling, refer to how social workers perceived the measures taken by the government during the pandemic and its influence on their work with the beneficiaries. Difficulties during the pandemic, Positive aspects of the pandemic and Roles of social workers in the pandemic are also presented.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, roles of the social workers, valorization, storytelling.*

## 1. Introduction

The profession of social worker is a vocational profession. It is an indisputable thing. Not everyone can practice in this field. And more, if you are exposed to unexpected challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges to which no one had any answer, we can say that being a social worker is not only a vocational profession. You need well-grounded theoretical training, regularly updated and experience in the field, so that you can make decisions quickly and optimally for your beneficiaries.

If your life, both personal and professional, is turned upside down by a pandemic in which governmental measures are taken that affect your freedom and everyday life, you might ask yourself questions, as a social worker, if you chose the profession well.

Nothing is as you knew it. Social work means working with the beneficiaries' face to face. Government measures related to the pandemic have prohibited this Worldwide. Exactly at the time when people most needed to be helped and supported, exactly then you could no longer interact directly with them. Alternative solutions were immediately found. By phone, online... But is it possible to do social work by phone and online?

From this question I started the present study. I wanted to identify how social workers perceived the pandemic period. How they worked, how they managed considering all the legislative barriers of that period.

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## 2. Theoretical Framework

Social work “involves several domains of competency and requires development of a metacognitive-level intellectual space within which competing theories and strategies may be held and assessed for use in a given situation.” (Garner, 2011, p. 259).

Social work in Romania is of recent date. Historically, the training of social workers began more than 90 years ago. However, due to communism in the 20th century, the period in which this field was absent from the social system, we are talking about the training of specialists in social work for only 30 years, after 1989 (Lazăr, 2015). Practically, a new beginning for social work which in democratic societies has developed and reached a level that Romania is still trying to reach.

Among the challenges that social work has faced and still faces in Romania, the following could be mentioned: insufficient financial, material, human and informational resources (Sălăjeanu, 2010); poor coordination and implementation of some social work measures; low salaries of employees in the field; the weak development of social work in the rural area, especially at the local level, in the more isolated areas of the country, where we encounter insufficient financial and human resources; the focus on solving already existing problems, instead of focusing on the prevention of social problems; the presence of people in the field of social work who do not have the necessary qualification for this field, but who have duties in social work (Csesznek & Şimon, 2019); overloading of staff in the field, non-compliance with quality standards regarding the number of cases for people working in social services (even law 292/2011 sets a number of 300 beneficiaries per social worker); the preponderance of monetary benefits over the provision of social services to those in problematic situations (Lazăr, 2015).

Statistics show that in Romania, 46.1% of the population lives in rural areas (Romanian Statistical Yearbook, 2021). Unfortunately, even the rural environment, so populated, is underdeveloped in most areas: infrastructure, education, health and of course, social services (European Commission, 2021). It is necessary to develop social services, to rethink social policies at the level of rural communities, so that the respective population can benefit from an optimal quality of life (Faludi & Neamţu, 2020).

To all these problems, the negative way in which social work is presented in the mass media is added (Guy, 1994, Franklin & Parton, 2014). We can mention here the confusion of the name of the profession of social worker, which some associate with personal assistant, with personal caregiver or even with nurse (medical assistant in Romanian language). Also, in the Romanian mass media, especially the negative cases related to social assistance are presented (Popa, 2016).

The roles of practicing social workers are diverse, such as facilitator, change agent, mediator (Sorescu, 2010), community organizer, needs assessor, project manager, social counselor (Dhavaleshwar, 2016), case manager, direct service provider, home assessments, information and referral (Lazăr, Dégi, Iovu, 2016). These are the most time-consuming roles for social workers.

In addition to these roles, the COVID-19 pandemic has added new challenges and new responsibilities. From physical distancing measures, stopping certain sectors of activity, limiting travel, wearing protective masks, etc., to more restrictive measures on certain

sectors of activity. This is what happened with residential social assistance, according to military ordinance no. 8 of April 10, 2020. Thus, in the residential service centers, the decision was taken to isolate the staff at work, for 14 days, alternatively, followed by a period of isolation at home, also for 14 days.

This pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has also made the life and work of social workers difficult, especially those who work with people or groups vulnerable to this virus, such as the elderly or people with various chronic diseases or disabilities.

Even if they did not work in the residential system, and did not remain isolated for 14 days without interruption, social workers also faced other challenges during the pandemic. If direct contact with the beneficiaries has been prohibited, how can you carry out social evaluations and surveys under these conditions as far as the other activities that involve working face to face with the beneficiary, how can you transfer them to the online area? One of the competencies of the social worker is to relate to beneficiaries. And the most important aspect in relational competence is communication (Iovu, Lazăr, 2020). How can you be competent, as a social worker, if communication is not complete? Because this happened during the pandemic. Many social work activities were transferred during the pandemic to online or telephone. This means poor communication because a main ingredient is missing: the non-verbal.

### **3. Methodological Framework**

Between October 2020 and April 2021, I conducted a qualitative, explanatory-descriptive research, which aimed to identify the perception of social workers, at the level of Braşov County, regarding the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2, to find out how they lived professionally this period, what difficulties they encountered and what moments brought satisfaction for them. Also, I wanted to find out what they thought the main roles of social workers in this pandemic were. The objectives of the research were to identify the professional difficulties faced by social workers since the beginning of the pandemic, to identify the professional opportunities that appeared in the lives of social workers from Braşov county and to identify the roles of social workers during the pandemic period.

The method used in the research was the interview with the semi-structured interview technique while the tool used was the interview guide, in which I had questions that followed the themes: perceptions, expectations and satisfactions related to the profession of social worker; the perception of the pandemic period, from a personal and professional point of view; the influence of the current situation (the COVID-19 period) on the work of the social worker and the future of social work.

The interviews were conducted in keeping with research ethics, the participating subjects were informed about the research objectives and were assured of data protection by signing a confidentiality agreement.

The sampling used in the present research paper was theoretical sampling. Data collection has occasionally encountered several barriers, especially related to the problems generated by the pandemic: physical distance, working in an online environment, fear of interacting with other people, health protection, etc.

Thus, the initially set data collection period (2 months) was extended, as I wanted to

apply the semi-structured face-to-face interview, due to the accuracy of the information I wanted to obtain. I knew from the experience of previous research, the fact that in online or telephone interviews there are barriers that I cannot manage and can generate distortions, in terms of the data obtained from the subjects (short answers, barriers related to the lack of physical interaction, the environment in which the subject is, overly elaborate answers, lacking spontaneity, etc.) (Cooper, 2009, Vicsek, 2016)

The interview guide was applied to 18 social workers from Brasov County, two male, 16 female, half of them up to 30 years old, the other people being in the 40-49 age group. A number of 10 respondents come from state institutions and 8 interviewed subjects work in non-governmental organizations. 3 respondents are practicing social workers (minimum 1 year of experience in the specialty of studies necessary to exercise the profession of social worker and at least 1 year of experience in the field), 5 respondents are specialist social workers (minimum 3 years of experience in the specialty of studies necessary to exercise the profession of assistant social worker and at least 3 years of experience in the field) and 10 being main social workers (minimum 5 years of experience in the specialty of the studies necessary to exercise the profession of social worker and at least 5 years of experience in the field).

Upon reaching theoretical saturation, I stopped collecting data, focusing on processing, analyzing and interpreting the obtained data. I introduced the transcribed interviews in the NVivo 12 software, which handled data processing and data analysis. I used open, axial and selective coding, by classifying the data into categories and subcategories, after which the interpretation of the data followed the storytelling method.

#### 4. Findings

The analysis of the interviews was performed by starting from the research questions and themes. Because when processing and analyzing the data, I went through open, axial and selective coding, I will briefly present the results obtained. I chose this form, because I will present the interpretation of the data with the storytelling method, which is very suggestive in terms of the research results.

In the axial and selective coding, I grouped the answers into 4 large categories:

- Difficulties during the pandemic
- Positive aspects related to the pandemic
- Roles of social workers in the pandemic
- Valuing the work of the social worker.

Regarding the difficulties during the pandemic, they were, as the social workers described them: physical distancing; lack of normal interaction; the measures quickly imposed by the government; increased workload; forced digitization; periodic testing; the lack of time; the risk of becoming infected; personal emotional difficulties: *"It was a terrifying year, especially for the social work departments, the workload doubled, ...I had no time to rest"*(14); *"I found it a rather difficult year, with all these measures to prevent Covid, we could not interact as we did before the pandemic"* (113).

As I said above, the pandemic took us all by surprise. And that involved everyone's adaptation to this situation, depending on everyone's resilience.

This is also the reason why, in the responses of the interviewees, I found many positive aspects related to the pandemic: the development of technology at the level of organizations; sanitary hygiene measures; appreciation of the people around, especially by the beneficiaries; online conferences held for social workers.

As we can see, **the forced digitalization** was seen as both a **difficulty**: *"the forced use of technology was not something very difficult, but I know colleagues in the guild who found it very difficult in the beginning"* (I1), but also as a **strong point**: *"the digitization of forms, of data collection at my place of work was a real help, an efficient measure"* (I15). At the same time, most respondents were able to identify the **positive aspects** of forced digitalization, which they will benefit from now on. Thus, social workers now benefit from participating in conferences, webinars, online courses, which facilitates their access to them and eases their life, both personal and professional: *"conferences, webinars organized by CNASR<sup>2</sup>, on various topics, it was much easier to participate, because online they were much more accessible, I could talk with other guild colleagues"* (I2).

Although this technological development in the social work system was long awaited and desired, it was not implemented before the pandemic, except to a small extent. The pandemic has forced the social work system, as well as other systems (educational, health, administrative) to really develop digitalization in institutions and organizations.

Among the roles of social workers, which were exercised most often during the pandemic, the respondents described: the role of agent; supporting role; the role of activity coordinator; the role of mediator, the role of case manager: *"to identify disadvantaged people and help them. We were the link between the beneficiaries and society in general, we were their representative, their agent"* (I9). Another **positive aspect** brought by the pandemic is the fact that the work of social workers could be seen and **appreciated**. Unfortunately, until the time of the pandemic, in the mass media, the social worker had been presented, most of the time, in a negative sense. The pandemic has changed this perspective, with social workers being recognized for their professional roles in the community. Also, the work of the social worker was appreciated and recognized for its true value, not only by the beneficiaries, but also by the community and society: *"certainly there are people who understood that the social worker is not only the person who sits in an office and gives social aids, but has a special status in the community, but especially in the lives of the beneficiaries with whom he is in contact"* (I17), *"I think that some people have now found out that the work of social workers is a very important one in society"* (I10).

For data interpretation, I chose the **storytelling** method, which involves presenting the research in the form of a story. In total, there are three ways in which storytelling can be done. These are central tendency, interpretive and descriptive style. In my case I chose the descriptive, narrative style, combined with thematic analysis, keeping the central themes of the research. Thus, the story below is told through the voice of the interviewees, the research subjects, in which the researcher's work boils down to combining the materials, organizing them in a sequence, where the researcher lets the described world speak for itself (Scârnci, 2007; Lenette, Cox & Brough, 2015; Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021).

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<sup>2</sup> The National Association of Social Workers from Romania

### ***Once upon a time, a pandemic...***

*All well and good, so to speak, until the pandemic came into our lives in early 2020.*

*Already, after more than a year, since I forgot the normalcy before, I can say that it was a very difficult year, with a lot of difficulties that we social workers had to face daily at work. We couldn't practise our profession as we should have, for example physical distancing caused us some problems at the beginning of the pandemic, all the uncertainty we were all in.*

*There were many difficulties that both myself and my colleagues faced for sure. First, we had to react very quickly to this pandemic, in order to protect ourselves and those around us, especially the beneficiaries in a vulnerable group. Everything came very suddenly, overnight. We went online suddenly, we were no longer going to the beneficiaries physically, we started to keep in touch with them by phone or through various online applications.*

*I had colleagues who were isolated at work for 14 days, without leaving the respective centers. It was very difficult for them to stay away from their families for so long, but out of love for this job, they accepted it and coped brilliantly.*

*I had moments when due to the high workload, I felt the need to take a break, but due to the lack of time, I always continued.*

*But the pandemic also brought something good, for example the use of technology in an efficient way, through which we were able to gain time for ourselves and the beneficiaries. Another important aspect was related to the conferences organized online, for example by CNASR, in which I could participate from home, without crossing half the country, when they were physically organized in a distant county.*

*Regarding the appreciation of social workers, there are certainly people who understood that the social worker is not only the person who sits in an office and gives social aids, but has a special status in the community, but especially in the lives of the beneficiaries with whom he is in contact.*

*I would like to share some advice from my personal experience for future social workers. For those who want to work as a social worker, I recommend volunteering for different organizations, to see a bit of life, the work of a social worker before getting a job. You must be serious and love your job, otherwise it will be a pain every day you practice in a field you don't love.*

## **5. Conclusions**

The current research completes the research that was done during the pandemic. In the specialized literature, I did not find anything related to the aspects found in the current research. The period of the COVID-19 pandemic came with many challenges worldwide. Challenges for which no one was prepared. The same happened in the field of social work.

Social work is a practical field and is carried out eminently in direct contact with the beneficiary (Doel & Shardlow, 2005). What the pandemic prohibited was exactly this.

And because the pandemic came with so many restrictions, I expected the results of the current research to capture only the negative aspects of that period. However, beyond the challenges and difficulties to which social workers and beneficiaries of social work

were exposed, I noticed that the pandemic also had positive aspects, which changed many things for the better in the social work system: digitization and technology system and the valorization and appreciation of the social worker's work. There are aspects that will remain in the field of social work and that can be developed, so that social work in Romania reaches the level of Western social work.

Unfortunately, the measure of social distancing also had an effect on obtaining data from the field, for the current research. I gathered data from a few social workers willing to answer face to face, there is still fear regarding the spread of the virus.

For the future, I will design the methodology of a similar research, so as to obtain answers from more social workers, applying more research techniques, taking online research into account.

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