PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND DEONTOLOGY IN THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

The article is focused on the characterization of the main obligations and responsibilities of the social worker, provided by the deontology of social assistance. The author mentions that nowadays each profession has its deontology, an elaborated system of rules and norms that must be respected to ensure the professional success of any specialist. The deontology of social assistance represents a complex of norms, rules, prescriptions and provisions about professional duty and obligations, about all types of responsibilities of the social workers. The author further exposes the social worker's responsibilities in various types of relationships (social worker - beneficiary; social worker - colleague; social worker - employing institution), with ethics in social work as the main support. In this sense, paying special attention to ethical considerations is an important means of affirming the integrity of the profession, the desire and the decision to provide through social assistance better knowledge, as well as an understanding of the human life meaning, highlighting as the first „duty" the service as optimal as possible for the beneficiary, because the mission of the social worker is to help people who are temporarily in difficulty.

Keywords: social assistance, professional deontology, social assistance deontology, code of ethics.

Résumé

L'article se concentre sur la caractérisation des principales obligations et responsabilités du travailleur social, prévues par la déontologie de l'assistance sociale. L'auteur mentionne qu'aujourd'hui chaque profession possède sa propre déontologie, un système élaboré de règles et de normes qui doivent être respectées pour assurer la réussite professionnelle de tout spécialiste. La déontologie de l'assistance sociale représente un ensemble de normes, règles, prescriptions et dispositions concernant les devoirs et obligations professionnels, concernant tous les types de responsabilités du travailleur social. L'auteur expose en outre les responsabilités du travailleur social dans différents types de relations (travailleur social – bénéficiaire; travailleur social - collègue; travailleur social – institution employeur), avec l'éthique du travail social comme principal support. En ce sens, accorder une attention particulière aux considérations éthiques est un moyen important pour affirmer l'intégrité de la profession, le désir et la décision d'offrir, à travers l'assistance sociale, une meilleure connaissance, ainsi qu'une compréhension du sens de la vie humaine, en soulignant comme

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le premier « devoir» rendre le service le plus optimal possible pour le bénéficiaire, parce que la mission du travailleur social est d'aider les personnes qui sont temporairement en difficulté.

Mots clés : assistance sociale, déontologie professionnelle, déontologie de l'assistance sociale, code de déontologie.

Rezumat
Articolul este focusat pe caracterizarea principalelor obligațiuni și responsabilități ale asistentului social, prevăzute de deontologia asistenței sociale. Autorul menționează că astăzi fiecare profesie își are o deontologie proprie, un sistem elaborat de reguli și norme care se cer a fi respectate pentru a asigura succesul profesional al oricărui specialist. Deontologia asistenței sociale reprezintă un complex de norme, reguli, prescripții și dispoziții despre datoria și obligațiunile profesionale, despre toate tipurile de responsabilități ale asistentului social. Autorul expune, în continuare, responsabilitățile asistentului social în diverse genuri de relații (asistent social – beneficiar; asistent social – coleg; asistent social – instituție angajatoare), având ca suport principal etica în asistența socială. În acest sens, acordarea unei atenții speciale considerentelor etice constituie un important mijloc în afirmarea integrității profesiei, a dorinței și deciziei de a oferi prin asistența socială o mai bună cunoaștere, precum și o înțelegere a semnificației vieții umane, evidențiind ca primă „datorie" deservirea cât mai optimă a beneficiarului, căci menirea asistentului social este de ajuta persoanele aflate temporar în dificultate.

Cuvinte-cheie: asistență socială, deontologie profesională, deontologia asistenței sociale, cod deontologic.

1. Introduction

The origin of the term „deontology" belongs to the well-known founder of utilitarianism *Jeremy Bentham*, 1748-1832. Initially, the term was assigned a narrow, religious-moral connotation, referring to the believer's duty and obligations to God, to religion and to the religious community and later the term was used by J. *Bentham* (Bulgaru, 2013) to designate the moral theory as a whole. However, the term „deontology" soon acquired another meaning, referring to the proper conduct, deeds and actions of a particular person, a professional (Bertrand, 2000). Newtonian mechanics led J. Bentham to introduce the idea of differential measurement in the context of utilitarian deontology, which was interpreted as the empirical study of moral duties.

Professional deontology is concerned with the moral imperatives of a profession, reflected mainly in terms of the moral duties or obligations imposed by the exercise of the profession in society. Professional deontology gears towards the development of strict rules similar to those of law. It stands between morality and law, between public opinion and written legal law. And yet, duty, as the object of deontology, through its normative-prescriptive content, as Cozma (2009) mentions, resonates concurrently both ethically and legally, whilst deontology appears to us as „the science of what is just and reasonable", thus involving the sphere of law, but with the interference of the debate of moral conscience. The spectrum of deontology is one „within the limits of the law", activating a specific „freedom" -

the possibility to choose, to find solutions appropriate to particular situations, having moral benchmarks that can decisively help (Cozma, 2009, p. 321).

2. Professional ethics and deontology of social worker

The overriding values of social work are formulated in the Code of Ethics, also called Professional Ethics, which serves as a guide to practice. The main criterion of professional ethics is „duty". The theory of duty and the proper conduct of the professional in the process of exercising his profession is called *deontology* (from the Greek *deonthos* - due, as it should, as it ought). Although the origins of the term *deontology* date back to the beginnings of human civilisation, it was coined by Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832, the famous founder of *utilitarianism* - an ethical doctrine based on the principle of the greatest happiness, according to which human actions are good to the extent that they lead to the greatest happiness, happiness is understood as the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. The discipline that Bentham wanted to build on was called *deontology* or *the science of duty*. As it evolved historically and a wide range of professional occupations emerged, deontology became a true science involving a consistent interrelationship between professional ethics and the values that delimit the axiological system of a profession (Dilon & Prițcan, 2008, p. 43).

The *Code of Deontology* can be seen as a codification of the special obligations resulting from deliberate affiliation to a specific profession, such as social work. The *Code of Deontology* is therefore intended to clarify the moral aspects of professional activity. On this basis, social workers can identify the morally correct manner of action. To regulate relations between social workers and clients in the interests of the latter, all modern professions have drawn up codes of ethics (doctors, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, etc.). For example, the Hippocratic oath has become a guide to professional ethical conduct for countless generations of doctors for over 2400 years.

The first Code of Deontology for social workers was drafted by Mary Richmond in 1920 under the title „Experimental Code of Ethics for Social Caseworkers"; in 1951, the General Assembly of the American Association of Social Workers adopted the first Code of Ethics for all members of that association; in 1979, the National American Association of Social Workers adopted a new Code of Ethics, which was subsequently revised in 1996 (NASW). In 1994, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSSW) at a meeting of practitioners in Colombo, Sri Lanka, adopted the *„Ethics of Social Work. Principles and Standards".* This document, based on the „International Code of Ethics for the Professional Social Worker", adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers in 1976, contains the basic ethical principles of social work practice and recommended procedures in the social worker's relationships with clients, colleagues and other professionals.

The International Ethical Standards for Social Workers have been established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), and other conventions ensuing therefrom. The International Federation of Social Workers encourages professionals in every country to discuss and clarify the particular

issues relevant to their country. Thus, „Ethics of Social Work. Principles and Standards” is recommended as a general guide upon which professionals in each state can establish their professional ethical principles (Dilon & Priţcan, 2008, p. 44).

Based on these recommendations, the Romanian Association for the Promotion of Social Assistance, a member of IFSW, drafted and approved in 1997 the first *Code of Ethics for Social Workers in Romania.* Taking this code as a model, as well as the Code of Ethics of some countries with advanced experience (UK, USA, Netherlands), the Association for the Promotion of Social Work in the Republic of Moldova drafted in 2005 the *Code of Ethics of the Social Worker in the Republic of Moldova.*

The Code of Ethics of the Social Worker provides a set of values, principles, and professional standards that provide the framework within which the social worker can make decisions regarding their relationship with the assisted person, colleagues and the institution in which they work. Whichever profession it is addressed to, any Code of Ethics is made up of a set of rights and duties, freedoms and responsibilities, which professionals must respect when they practice. These are all essentially a set of ethical and axiological rules, the fundamental purpose of which is to guide practitioners in each profession from a moral point of view, but also from the point of view of the values accepted in the wider context by society.

Nowadays, as social mobility increases, so does occupational mobility; people switch from one profession to another or practise several professions simultaneously. The general principles of a Code (respect for the rights of the individual, competence, responsibility, etc.) also apply to other professions. However, contemporary times are characterised by a shift from *mono-professional* to *inter-professional deontology*, especially when practitioners from different professions are involved in solving a problem. An example of inter-professional deontology was provided in the interwar period by the Bucharest Sociological School, which organised the famous village mapping campaigns involving sociologists, psychologists, teachers, agronomists, doctors, musicologists and other professionals.

Another phenomenon present in our society is that of multi-professionalisation, where the same individual can be a writer, artist, teacher, publicist, public person, etc., which implies the existence of inter-professionalisation at the individual level. Such a person is bound by the moral and value rules of interprofessional deontology and is obliged to comply with requirements specific to each profession or common to them. Deontology refers to the moral imperatives of a profession, to its values, but those who have embraced this profession are not only bound by the deontological code specific to their profession. They must also respect civil and criminal jurisdiction. In his work 'Introduction to the Deontology of Communication', T. Sârbu, in developing a general definition that encompasses all these elements, defines deontology as *a discipline whose object of study is at the confluence of law and morality. Its main task is to establish principles, rules and norms of professional conduct within the various relationships involved in the exercise of a profession: internal relationships, specific to*

each type of professional activity, and external relationships with the direct/indirect beneficiaries of the services/goods provided" (Sârbu, 1999, pp. 21-22).

The Code of Ethics of the profession can be both formal and informal. The *formal code* is the written code to which the specialist formally adheres to be admitted to practice his or her profession (e.g. Hippocratic Oath in medicine, Social Worker's Code, etc.). The *informal code* is unwritten, based on customs, and habits, but sometimes has greater power than the formal one. Some deontological codes (including the Code of Ethics for Social Workers, approved in the Republic of Moldova (Code of Ethics, 2006, p. 7) prescribe not only the rules that professionals must follow but also the sanctions they will face if they do not respect the specific rules of the given profession. In other words, a Code of Ethics attempts to translate professional values into behavioural frameworks.

The functions of codes of ethics that are valid in almost all contemporary professions are:

- to 'guide' practitioners of a particular profession when they are faced with practical dilemmas involving an ethical issue;
- to protect beneficiaries against incompetence and unprofessionalism;
- to regulate the behaviour of practitioners and their relationships with beneficiaries, colleagues and practitioners in other professions, with other employees of the institution in which they work and with the wider community;
- to provide supervision and advice to practitioners to evaluate their work (Dilon & Prițcan, 2008, pp. 40-41).

Thus, codes of ethics are perceived as a commitment of the profession to the community, ensuring its trust in the profession, without which it could not gain authority. Social workers must take responsibility for the consequences of their actions by the fundamental values, and the general ethical principles of social work as reflected in its codes of ethics.

In the context of the above, we would like to point out that the principles of professional ethics are closely related to those of societal ethics, but are not identical. In the same way that social work values are derived from societal values, but are not necessarily identified with them, professional ethics have the same source as societal ethics, but they differ in certain important respects. These are differences in priorities, intensity of action or applications. Such an important difference can be seen, for example, in the case of governing ethical principles.

The Code of Ethics informs the public about the profession, signalling that it has rules of conduct. By enhancing the credibility of the profession, the code of ethics guarantees the loyalty of beneficiaries and protects them. At the same time, the code of ethics creates solidarity within the group of professionals. By imposing certain responsibilities and obligations on their members through the code of ethics, professional groups aim to ensure professional competence and the trust of society in them.

The code of ethics is a moral contract between beneficiaries and organizations, between members of an organization, a means of guiding the

decisions and actions of the professionals concerned in their relations with beneficiaries. The Code of Ethics provides a benchmark, an ideal, setting out values and principles that are unanimously recognized. In doing so, „the code gives everyone a sense of security, of collective strength", the maintenance of such regulations being „to protect the public interest" (Bertrand, 2000, pp. 66-67). Through such instruments, deontology „upholds the morality of a profession and protects society from inappropriate and undesirable manifestations of its members in specific situations" (Cozma, 2009, pp. 129-130). Thus, codes of ethics stand as a commitment of the profession to the community, ensuring its trust in the profession, without which it could not gain authority.

3. Conclusions and discussions

The Code of Ethics can be considered as a codification of special obligations resulting from deliberate adherence to a particular profession, such as social work (Code of Ethics, 2006). It represents a theoretical framework of reference intended to clarify the rights and duties of the profession, drawn up by the law, and the moral aspects of professional activity. The Code of Ethics of Social Work stipulates general moral standards/imperatives, principles and norms, and values that shape decision-making on the most appropriate action. General moral imperatives usually refer to the protection of fundamental human rights, social justice, protection of health, and welfare, meeting social needs, integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, non-discrimination, confidentiality, self-discipline, etc. Based on the code of ethics, social workers can identify the morally correct way of acting. Thus, the Code of Ethics of the profession of social workers in Romania (published in Official Monitor no. 173, March 2008) „establishes the mandatory rules of professional conduct of social workers, i.e. the members of the National College of Social Workers in Romania". Its main goal is to regulate the principles and rules of conduct of social workers to prevent the emergence of situations that could affect their reputation and their good practice, the development and consolidation of the College, as well as the image of the professional body of social workers in general (Bulgaru, 2013; Buzducea, 2009).

Codes of social work ethics, developed in different countries, focus on the fundamental values of the social work profession and stipulate the human value, dignity and uniqueness of all people, as well as their rights and responsibilities, asserting the willingness of professionals to always act according to moral principles. However, the Code of Ethics is not intended to provide a detailed set of rules on how social workers should act in specific situations in the complexity of social and professional life. Rather, as mentioned above, by setting out general principles of conduct, the Code aims to encourage social workers to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas they face and to make decisions based on the values of the profession about how to behave in particular cases.

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