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Professional Values in Social Work Students and Mid-career Practitioners: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Education and development of socio-emotional skills of social work students has been designed to facilitate learning and strengthening of ethical, aesthetic and emotional values, indispensable for future practitioners in the field. The most difficult aspect of training is the integration of the cognitive and behavioral components with the emotional one. Achieving internal consonance between knowledge, attitudes and feelings represents the most challenging bet of the education process. Traditionally, a formative focus is dedicated to the creation of knowledge and enhancement of desirable behaviors according to the professional standards of social work practice. Less time and focus is invested in exploring and understanding the emotional component of social work profession. This study is an exploration of roles, values embraced by social works students and mid-career practitioners as well as emotions experienced by them, in order to identify relevant training needs.

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1. Introduction

Complexity of ethical decision in social work practice

Social work is one of the professions in which the universe of moral values plays an important role. The existence of this profession is conditioned by the acceptance of essential attributes strongly influenced by a set of moral values such as equity, social justice, human solidarity, respect and care for others.

Values are strongly embedded into the social work field substantiating its existence as well as its everyday practice. In practice, social work fundamentals include four core categories of values: a) the values of society or community in which social worker operates, that must be taken into account in order to preserve the client's dignity b) professional values that define the profession and are included in legal documents (i.e. Code of Ethics) c) the personal values of the social worker, with its own axiological constellation and d) client's values - with its own universe of attitudes, beliefs and convictions (Morales & Sheafor, 1980).

Considering these different value sets in social work practice makes the professional decision to be sometimes very complex.

A superficial assessment of these sets of values would make one to think that between social and professional values should be a perfect continuity, professional values being reflection of the society’s most preferred values. In fact, there are possible mismatches and dissonances generated by the dominant ideologies, traditions and societal inertia, prejudices and stereotypes, as well as by the existence of multiple subcultures.

Things are even more complicated when we consider the relationship inside the triangle represented by the client values, the practitioner's values and the professional values. This is where it is more likely that values collide and challenge the social worker to find the right balance and use them right in the decision making process.

2. Dilemmas in social worker training

Given the intersection of different sets of values often times the social worker must acquire the necessary skills in order to make an informed professional decision. Also social workers has to be equipped with various tools of ethical management. The Code of Social Workers Ethics in Romania indicates seven core values of the profession. Building on these core values, the following principles and standards have been formulated: provision of client focused social services, promotion of social justice, respect of individual dignity and its uniqueness, and recognition of self-determination, importance of integrity and competence for healthy human relations.

According to Gert, Culver and Clouser [2] codes of ethics represent a collective recognition of professional responsibilities by all the members involved. These codes could not guide all social worker’s decisions, especially in those situations when there are conflicts between different values [3]. Professional ethics requires unconditional acceptance of the client. However, values, beliefs and behavioral practices of the client, can often come in conflict with the social worker’s values. A good example of this situation is presented by Comartin Erin B. and A. Antonio González-Prendes [4]. They argue that when a person with feminist beliefs is assigned to assist sex offenders who have committed acts of violence against women, she obviously might exhibit an extreme anger against them. Effective preparation for such situations could be the focus of formative courses.

The primary objective of foundational training and continuing education for students and practitioners is to ensure and enhance knowledge of professional ethics requirements. Although it seems to be a simple task, it is not because in real life the choice of the social work career is not always the result of a rational decision resulting from a perfect match between personal values, professional ethics and fair knowledge of work content. The social work training should address this issue by exposing students to various learning opportunities that will allow them thoroughly explore personal values in relationship to social work professional ethics [5].

Therefore, social work training curriculum should cover the cognitive component (e.g. provision of information and sharing of knowledge) in concert with more complex approaches that stimulate lived experiences
that are thought provoking when it comes to challenges (e.g. values conflict) derived from the need of blending personal and professional values and developing attitudes and professional behavior. Students get to know the professional values, to accept their rationale, but often times we find that there are significant distances between knowledge of, and adherence to these values and personal values. Therefore, learning must be accompanied by a cognitive affective learning, which involves "changes in feelings, attitudes and values that influence their thinking and behavior" [6]. Through education and development of socio-emotional skills of students, there are achieved goals of learning and consolidation of professional ethics, contributing thus to the integration of cognitive, behavioral and emotional components.

A comprehensive curriculum that would include affective learning will also promote active learning and student engagement in identifying solutions of conflictual situations and addressing ethical dilemmas for which there is no clear explanation. A frequently encountered situation in social work practice involves the conflict between preserving client’s autonomy and promoting welfare [7]. Often times, social workers have to make decisions that limit client’s personal autonomy to promote his/her welfare. How far can get social worker’s paternalism? There are many possible situations and questions that might occur in professional practice. However, their solutions and answers are most of the times circumstantial and dependent on the nature of the problems addressed. It is important that social workers are aware of the wide range of sensitive situations they may encounter over years of practice and be prepared to meet the real life challenges by using tools and strategies learned in school to inform their decision making that impact the lives of their clients.

Professional codes of ethic introduce values and principles as prima facie, therefore, the solutions provided in the code of conduct are not sufficient to solve the complex problems that arise when principles and professional values collide [8].

3. Purpose of the study

The first step in achieving compatibility between personal values and personal values of the social worker is the attainment of an appropriate level of knowledge by exploring social work students’ universe values. Accordingly, this empirical research aims to identify personal values of students to understand pressure nodes of the core values, potential conflicts and their intensity. These results will be used to identify and prioritize the training needs and propose educational approaches that will enhance the compatibility between personal and professional values. The research methodology consisted of a survey that targeted professional social workers.

4. Methods and subjects

This research was designed based on the assumption that there are significant differences between the system of professional values of practitioners and social work students. A questionnaire was administered to 120 subjects (60 social workers from Constanta and Galati, aged 21 and 44, and 60 students enrolled in the Faculty of Social Work, aged from 18 to 24 years). Subjects completed a survey detailing various professional values. The analytic strategy was designed based on the principles of comparative research to detect differences and / or similarities between professional values of the two groups studied. The 120 subjects completed the Work Values Inventory, by D.E. Super [9], which include 45 items measured on a Likert scale in five steps where 1 indicates attributes "without significant importance" in choosing a profession to 5 used to label" very important" item for choosing the profession.

Scoring and interpretation. Results highlight the 15 fundamental professional values by summing the scores of three items corresponding to each values, such as altruism, creativity, need for prestige and independence etc. First 3-5 professional values for which subjects obtained the highest score (a range from 3-15 points), are descriptive of the activity in which subjects are most likely to obtain job satisfaction:

a) occupations with high social status that influence the degree of power and influence and increase the likelihood for being respected in the wider society, or activities that allow the application of new ideas;
b) preferences for activities generating satisfaction as a result of completion of tasks demonstrated by evidence and tangible results;

c) professions that involve working with people and help improve their quality of life.

In an attempt to explore the potential conflicts between students' social values and those of their potential future clients, researchers considered the use of a "Self-Assessment Exercise: Possible Values Conflicts When Helping Others", translated and adapted from Summers, 2012 [10]. The self-assessment questionnaire comprised of 20 items, included the most difficult social cases that may be encountered in practice of social work, required subjects to score as following: 1 point attributed to less challenging situations; 2 points assigned to situations generating discomfort; 3 points assigned to situations considered by the respondent, unacceptable in terms of its moral values which could make it impossible to assist clients involved. The range for the Self-assessment Questionnaire score was between a minimum of 20 and maximum of 60 points, reflecting the intensity of conflict between social worker and client value.

5. Findings and results

Analysis of the results has verified the assumption that professional values are somewhat different between the two groups studied (practitioners and social work students).

Mid-career Practitioners responded with higher values for following items:

- Good working relations with supervisors - 14.19 pts (of 15 pts possible);
- Professional lifestyle (Time Flexibility, working according to your own time schedule) - 14.15 pts;
- Stability/Security (performing regular, predictable tasks in a job you are assured of that pays you reasonably well) - 13.79 pts,
- Workplace climate - 13.57 pts,
- Satisfaction resulting from the feeling of work well-done (tangible results) - 13.32 pts.

Student responses are predominantly headed by:

- Altruism (Helping Others – assisting other people directly to obtain information and/or resolve problems; seek to improve the human condition) - 14.29 pts (of 15 possible);
- Professional lifestyle (Time Flexibility, working according to your own time schedule) - 13.35 pts,
- Creativity/Innovation (develop new and different ideas, programs, and/or structures) - 13.27 pts,
- Good working relations with supervisors - 13.15 pts;
- Group Membership (belonging to a group with a common purpose and/or interest) - 13.02 pts.

All subjects (N = 120) were given minimum scores to:

- Achievement/Recognition (seek public recognition for your work contributions) - 11.75 pts;
- Aesthetic Appreciation (seek out the appreciation of beauty) – 11 pts;
- Supervising or Controlling Others (being in a position to oversee the work of other employees, or maintaining some control over the destinies of other people - 9.88 points.

We can talk here about low assertiveness, subjects enrolled in the study (practitioner and students) experienced a lower need to direct the course of events and actions of other people, showing rather a tendency of compliance, to follow organizations policies, accept external controls and supervision and to follow the rules. We could also speculate that our subjects experience a moderate need for independence in relation to external control, close monitoring and organizational constraints, feeling instead satisfaction of well done work and tangible results.

Comparing the results obtained by the two groups, we find professionals practicality and realism that put on top „Good relationship with superior leaders” (1) and „Stability/Security” (3), while students sit in their place „Altruism” (1) and „Creativity/Innovation” (3). Practitioners are of course aware of the fact that work implies a power based relationship and the quality of relationship with supervisors has repercussions on job security. This could have at least two explanations. It could be a symptom of a paternalistic tradition, or it could be a matter of
conjecture, generated by the economic crisis and constant labor restructuring. Young students without immediate pressure loss workplace are more idealistic and more generous, as they should be.

The second instrument used in our research, "Self-Assessment Exercise: Possible Values Conflicts When Helping Others" (Summers, 2012), revealed at least five major conflicts between the personal value system of students and clients’ values.

Students considered that they could not provide social services to:
- "A woman who sexually molested her son" (2.00 points out of 3.00),
- "A man who frequently brings up his fundamentalist religious beliefs (1.97 pts)"
- "A vocal member of an extremist party" (1.93 pts),
- "A homosexual couple who need help in improving their relationship" or same couple „seeking to adopt a child” (1.87 points).
- They also feel discomfort if they should work with „a man who makes it clear he often disciplines his children by using corporal punishment”, or „a gay man dying of AIDS”. Our subjects do not considered to have a values conflict with „A man seeking help to curb his extreme abuse of his wife”, „An interracial couple seeking premarital counseling”, „A man who has been getting more welfare than he is entitled to receive by using certain tricks to beat the system”, or „A woman who has chosen prostitution as a way to support herself and her children”. An assessment of potential conflict between personal value system of students and clients’ values, indicates that the score dynamic is not significantly influenced by the year of study; it rather demonstrates that the values and attitudes are difficult to change and, whenever applicable, the change is not proportional to cognitive acquisition. Therefore, the educational process should balance learning of technical skills with emotional and value oriented training that will ensure a greater level of confidence in both technical and human dimensions of the social work profession.

Calculation of correlations between variables included in the research indicates positive values ranging from 0.573 for „Material Gain” and „Stability/Security” or „Workplace climate” and 0.484 for „Material Gain” and „Good working relations with supervisors” (correlations are significant at a threshold of 0.01). Also, positive correlation coefficients indicate predictive relationships between „Work satisfaction” with a focus on clients’ welfare and „Workplace climate” (0.495), as well as between „Work satisfaction” and „Stability/Security” (0.471) or between „Workplace climate” and „Achievement/Recognition” (0.490).

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This study has been designed based on the belief that in the welfare sector, there is a direct causal relationship between the consonance of professional and personal values of the social worker regardless the level of expert knowledge. Consequently, the formative activities should aim to achieve this consonance by critically examining the values of the profession and personal values through evaluation and balanced judgment. The research team conducted an empirical investigation of the universe of values of social work practitioners and students in an effort to quantify intimate convictions, beliefs, feelings, values and highlight their importance along with social work values that have not been sufficiently explored and improve the understanding of the complexity of social work training and practice. Research findings indicate significant differences between the two groups (practitioners and students) that despite the shared values, seem to be very distinct. The critical difference is made by a pragmatic realism characteristic specific to the creative practitioners and by generosity and openness dominant for the students’ group. This finding raises the hope that future generation of social workers will opt for this career path motivated by ideals, beliefs and personal values consonant with professional requirements. Further, it highlights that the cohort of social work practitioners have a vested interest in specialization and continuing education with the goal of improving their practice.
References