

ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORKER

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Abstract

A set of moral standards plays an important role in social life, as it forms the basis for assessing the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Ethics attempts to determine and resolve normative issues relating to the specific social situations. Thus provides a basis for establishing the rules of human functioning in the situation arising from a particular social or professional role. The purpose of this paper is to present some aspects of professional ethics of social workers affecting the standards of the profession. Secondary sources were used in preparation of this text, especially code of ethics of social workers and other axiological contents on the issues discussed. A social worker, whose activities are essentially social, performs many professional roles. Therefore, they should be guided by values and moral principles, arising from general ethics and specific standards contained in the code of ethics of the profession. Codified professional ethics helps a social worker in the proper performance of duties and is a reference point for resolving ethical dilemmas. Standards contained in the code of ethics uphold the dignity of the profession and at the same time indicate how the representatives of the profession should behave, and how they should not. The provisions of the code of ethics relate to the profession, relationships with coworkers, beneficiaries, employers and society. They include specific objectives and tasks of social work, understood as a practical human activity for people who need support and assistance in the fulfillment of basic needs and solving problems arising as a result of deprivation of those needs.

***Key words:** social work, social worker, ethics, moral standards in social work*

Introduction

In the time of increased specialisation of occupation which is enhanced by a dynamic development of science and technology, many communities aim to create a universal canon of professional ethics, especially the written code of ethics applicable to a particular occupational category. The number of proponents of codified professional ethics is increasing. They believe that norms and values specified by the general ethics are too vague. They are not capable of resolving conflicts or dilemmas arising from the exercise of a particular profession. Moreover, they do not specify behaviour characteristic for a given profession. Such an opportunity is created only by a set of moral principles relating to a particular occupation.

One of the professions that require special multifaceted professional ethics is a profession of social worker. Their professional activity is essentially of a social character, which results from the aims of social work relating to the activities of individuals, groups and social environment. Therefore, a social worker undertaking numerous professional challenges should be guided by a particular respect for values and moral principles.

The **aim of this paper** is to present some aspects of professional ethics of social workers affecting the standards of the profession. **Secondary sources** were used in preparation of this text, especially code of ethics of social workers and other axiological contents on the issues discussed.

The value of professional ethics

Every society, class or social group needs assessments and moral standards. They are an essential element of the proper and orderly functioning of society. The lack of moral principles in society usually leads to a state of social anomie. An individual functioning in society that does not have a coherent system of norms and values — setting out a clear course of action — feels the uncertainty and confusion. Such a condition may imply the emergence of deviant behavior. The decomposition of moral values disorganizing social life makes many people feel the need to base human behavior on a universal, humanistic system of values. That is why they refer to ethics, which is primarily concerned with human action in terms of its moral value. To determine the moral value of an act, and therefore assess whether it is good or bad, it is necessary to refer it to a certain moral standard, which is the source and criterion of human conduct. Therefore, a set of moral standards plays an important role in social life as it forms the basis for assessing the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Ethics helps individuals to achieve the supreme good in human life, understood as the purpose of the action. It also helps to improve the society in which the individual lives. Ethics, by attempting to identify and resolve regulatory issues relating to specific, models social situations, provides a basis for establishing the rules of human functioning in the situation arising from a particular social or professional role. In terms of individuals, values motivate and influence the choices they make. In the social dimension they are a factor regulating the conduct of individuals and rules of living in a group (Rybczyńska & Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 1995; Olech, 2006).

On the basis of the general ethical assessments, guidelines and standards of professional ethics are designed. It is understood as a set of standards and guidelines that results from the tradition of the profession, the spirit of national culture, as well as basic ethical guidelines adopted in society and applied to the profession. Rules of professional ethics relate primarily to internal human skills and determine their conduct in professional matters based on the criteria of good and evil, justice and injustice (Szczepański, 1963; Kantowicz, 2009).

Ethics of a particular profession includes universal values relating to the whole society and the resulting standards, as well as moral contents specific to a particular profession. If ethical conflicts or dilemmas cannot be solved with the help of general ethics, it is necessary to refer to provisions of the code of professional ethics. Its contents uphold the dignity of a profession and at the same time indicate how representatives of the profession should behave and how should they not (Lazari-Pawłowska, 1971).

The formation of a code of professional ethics stems from the specificity of a particular profession and is usually dictated by concern for the ethos, which is a set of clearly defined values and norms specific to a certain profession. Professional ethics helps to make moral choices inseparably associated with work in a particular profession. It sets guidelines for conduct that is considered to be socially desirable and also protects workers against immoral behaviour in their professional work. Furthermore, when an occupational category has its own code of ethics, its prestige, social recognition and public confidence is increased.

It also provides some kind of protection against the pressures of the environment and at the same time clearly defines what society may require from representatives of a profession. The code of ethics helps the representatives of a particular profession in the proper performance of their duties and is their reference point for resolving common ethical dilemmas at work (Bragiel, 2002; Łuczyńska, 1998).

Professional codes of ethics have also their opponents, who question the necessity of the formation of such documents. According to them, codes of ethics limit the autonomy and initiative of workers who may assume that code's provisions are exhaustive. Thus, if there is not a specific ethical behest or prohibition in the code, then the conduct in this regard is arbitrary. Therefore, all kinds of loopholes in the code may cause that representatives of a profession will feel exempt from the need to conduct an independent evaluation in situations not specified by the provisions of the code, which in their view reduces personal responsibility for specific acts. In addition, codified professional ethics depersonalizes human beings, by reducing them to the level of the role they play in the structure of their professional life. Situational ethics imposes on individuals or forces them to follow certain behaviours that do not necessarily arise from personal values specific to a particular person. Strict adherence to the established rules of the code reduces workers' personal responsibility for specific acts. It may also reduce their personal vulnerability and autonomy of action and, consequently, lead to moral indifference. Another problem that may arise is anti-educational dimension of codes, which are limited to moral sanctions only, which causes that a failure to comply with the principles in the code does not result in any other penalties. The way in which the codes are formed is also questionable. In the name of freedom of individuals to self-determination, the opponents of those regulations question the right of people creating the codes to impose specific conducts and systems of values on others. Professions creating their own codes of ethics are supposed to face a crisis of morality and therefore are searching for excuses for their behaviour, which they want to formalise by imposing a certain rigid normative framework upon themselves (Lazari-Pawłowska, 1971; Brągiel, 2002; Łuczyńska, 1998).

According to the opponents of professional ethics, it changes the hierarchy of particular standards of general ethics. Specific ways of conduct characteristic to a given occupation are moved from one deontological position (more primitive), which belongs to them within the general morality to another position allocated to them within professional morality (detailed). Therefore, the introduction of rights resulting from belonging to a specific professional category is — according to the opponents — not only unjustified but even harmful. Legalising rights on the ethical level becomes a corruption of a profession by politicians who use social engineering of bind various social environments to political elites (Woleński, 1994; Galewicz, 2010).

Critical opinions relating to the specific standards of professional ethics do not undermine the importance and the need for codified rules of conduct. In the rapidly developing civil societies, professional ethics is growing in popularity, and codes of ethics are created for further professions. The profession of social worker is one of them. Ethics of the profession of social worker refers to specific objectives and tasks of social work, understood as practical human activity for people who need support and assistance in the fulfilment of basic needs and solving problems arising as a result of deprivation of those needs (Chraściciel, 2009).

A sphere, which specifically highlights the professional ethics of a social worker, is working with a client. It requires knowledge essential to diagnose the current condition of their clients, and the ability to make right decisions, which is necessary to establish the causes of the situation. Permanent contact with the beneficiary also requires the selection of an effective strategy and then implementing the developed strategy. Numerous decisions made in the course of work with clients are of ethical nature as they relate to moral values. A social worker undertaking specific social actions enters the system of values recognised by the beneficiary, and thus they interfere with client's independence and autonomy. Then it is necessary to maintain the interference ethical (Brągiel, 2002).

The specificity of social work

In every society there are people who are unable to provide for a dignified life for themselves and their families. Therefore, the actions of the state, local governments and non-governmental organizations, whose aim is to meet basic social needs on the available level, become necessary. It is important to improve the financial situation and equalize life chances of the economically and socially most vulnerable social groups in these endeavors. The practical implementation of social policy is one of the tasks of social work aimed at improving the social functioning of individuals (both individually and in groups) through actions directed at their social relationships, which affect the interaction between a person and their environment. Social welfare institutions try to restore (revive) lost or impaired abilities of social functioning, to ensure individual and collective resources and prevent social dysfunction (Wódz, 1996).

Frequently, the concept of 'social welfare' and 'social work' are used interchangeably, however, that in terms of content is not correct because welfare is a term of a broader spectrum of meanings. It covers social work, as well as many other activities aimed at achieving common prosperity. Welfare is understood as an institution of the social policy of the State, designed to enable individuals and families to overcome difficult life situations which they are not able to overcome by means of their own powers, resources and opportunities (Ustawa o pomocy społecznej, 2004, art. 2).

However, social work is aimed at improving the functioning of individuals and their families and is undertaken in an environment where the clients live. Benefits of social work are aimed at individuals and families to increase their activity and independence, as well as to support organisations and institutions that are important for meeting the needs of community members (Ustawa o pomocy społecznej, 2004, art. 45). Social work is hence a professional activity, which aims to help individuals and families in strengthening or regaining skills necessary to function in society by performing appropriate social roles and creating conditions conducive to this goal (Skidmore & Thackeray, 1996).

Different notions and concepts of social work indicate that it may be understood in a broader and narrow sense. The first approach involves both working directly with people who need support as well as institutional and administrative measures that will enable the provision of such direct assistance. Whereas in the narrower sense it means professional and intentional interpersonal assistance with the application of special methods. An essential feature of social work as a profession is performing duties associated with the public good and the control of exercising those responsible and socially desirable tasks. The main idea of social work is to improve human interactions with the surrounding environment (Kantowicz, 2010).

As mentioned above the professional activity of social workers should aim at greater subjectification of a beneficiary in order to transform them from a client receiving benefits to a partner, who, together with a social worker, should set goals and forms of aid. Such cooperation envisages an increase in the empowerment of a client, who in the future will be able to make active efforts to overcome difficult life situations, using advice and financial means available to them. A social worker cannot reduce their mission only to satisfy the general needs of a beneficiary as it would reinforce their passivity and helplessness. Being client's representative, a social worker should act on their behalf to help them remove different types of barriers, solve personal problems and inspire a particular activity so the recipient will be able to gradually become independent in overcoming their difficulties (Grotowska-Leder, 2002).

Challenges facing social workers require great competence as the profession is focused on other people, their life situation and environment. Social workers are usually referred to as caseworkers, working with people in order to elicit their abilities and increase options for action. Moreover, they provide social assistance and resources as well as they organise humanitarian social services and create social structures (DuBois & Krogsrud Miley, 1996).

The objectives of social work determine directions of professional activity of social workers. These primarily include providing clients with basic living conditions, which is associated with assisting individuals and families in the process of strengthening or restoring possibly full life skills and participation in social life. The activities of social workers should aim at strengthening the abilities of local groups and communities necessary for personal development and solving their problems themselves. This is due to the efficient organisation of effective and diversified forms of assistance while managing them and improving the quality of the infrastructure. It should be adapted to the changing needs of society. Another important task is to shape appropriate local social policy through active participation in the planning, the implementation and the development of services and programmes necessary to meet the social needs (Olubiński, 2004; Rybczyńska & Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 1995).

Social workers have to handle ethical dilemmas which emerge in the course of social work. They occur in the situation when a social worker wonders which act or omission is morally right. Sources of ethical dilemmas can be traced to the so-called conflict of values. Frequently, in order to achieve one value one must sacrifice the other. Therefore, the activities of a social worker are inseparably accompanied by choices. Ethical issues are most likely to arise from the characteristics of a helping relationship. Basically, there are four areas of ethical issues, which include: direct support for individuals and families, social policy and social welfare programmes, the relationship between co-workers in the workplace, the conflict of personal and professional values of a social worker (Kamiński, 2006).

A serious professional issue for a worker may be the so-called professional burnout syndrome. It manifests itself in cynicism, excessive irritability, stress, fatigue, the feeling of powerlessness, exhaustion, which may lead to symptoms of depression or loss of life energy. Social workers struggling with the problem of burnout have a negative attitude towards work, limit their contact with clients, begin to treat clients instrumentally and caregiving begins to change into monitoring (Szmagański, 2009; Trawkowska, 2007).

Characteristics of the Code of Ethics of a social worker

Social work as a specific field of science with its practical references is directed at socially useful activities undertaken for the good of society and individuals. A social worker who wants to carry out their duties professionally, should base on their knowledge, recognised values and acquired skills. In applying the principles of professional ethics they avoid simulated and ineffective work, and, moreover, try to be polite, kind, reliable, honest and they are guided by objectivity and treat their clients subjectively. By preserving certain values and standards, a social worker creates an appropriate attitude towards people and helps them solve problems and difficult life situations. To make their actions effective and morally correct, social workers should be guided by the Code of Ethics, which helps in the moral assessment of behaviour and in the resolution of ethical dilemmas (Rybczyńska & Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 1995; Kurecz, 2002).

A major achievement in determining standards of professional ethics for social workers in Poland was the adoption of the code of ethics in 1998. It is a kind of catalogue of duties, regulating social workers' behaviour as well as classifying the behaviour as acceptable and unacceptable. It clearly defines what is allowed and what is not allowed with regard to professional activities, as well as to the subject of the actions (Rybczyńska & Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 1995).

The code includes a preamble and six sections. The preamble states that the profession of social worker is not only a specific occupation, but also a vocation intended to meet the specific needs of society and ensure high quality of services. To achieve common objectives social workers unite in professional associations. They also have their own code of ethics,

which is a set of guidelines for everyday professional conduct. It is not only a set of instructions and prohibitions for people who have decided to pursue the profession of social worker but it also conveys important social values. These include i.a. actions for the common good of society, improvement of the living conditions of individuals and groups, activity for social justice. Code of ethics by specifying the standards of behavior of a social worker, tries to take control of possibly the most important spheres of their activity with the use of ethical regulations. Therefore, it is a basis for resolving ethical dilemmas or conflicts if a social worker's conduct is questionable, because it does not meet the conditions contained within or resulting from the code. The provisions of the code refer to the profession, relationship with co-workers, beneficiaries, employers and society. While preparing the document Association of Social Workers was guided by a concern for high standards of the profession they represent, which should inspire public confidence. A society that uses the services of social workers has the right to know the ethical standards and principles, which ensure exercising the profession in a reliable, professional and responsible way (Kodeks Etyczny Polskiego Towarzystwa Pracowników Socjalnych, 1998, Preamble; Siwek, 2009; Kozak, 2012).

The code of ethics applies to different aspects of the social workers' activity. In the section on the general attitude and social workers' conduct, their duties are determined, which clearly show that such an occupation is to be exercised by people of high professional and personal morale. In addition, possessing and continuous improvement of professional qualifications is necessary. A social worker should combine intellectual preparation, practical experience and contents resulting from the axionormative system in their professional work. Therefore, their actions require simultaneous use of professional knowledge, acquired skills and values underlying social work. While performing their duties, a social worker has to remember that they bear the ultimate responsibility for the quality and range of services to which they committed, which they delegate to someone else or personally perform. A key principle of their professional activities should always be the wellbeing of clients, and their primary responsibility to help solve their clients' problems in life. Inhumane or discriminatory practices against individuals or groups are unacceptable. Using professional contacts to pursue personal benefits is also unethical (Kodeks Etyczny Polskiego Towarzystwa Pracowników Socjalnych, 1998, Section I; Rybczyńska & Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 1995).

A social worker must remember that a beneficiary is free from coercion and external interference and thereby, they have the right to act in accordance with their autonomous will. An important condition for proper contacts with clients is the recognition and application of the principle of 'acquiescent protectiveness', which means that a social worker should have a sympathetic attitude towards their clients. This approach is associated with sensitivity towards others' needs and a tendency to help people in need. It is essential to demonstrate commitment to assist a beneficiary in solving their difficulties of life and to use knowledge, skills and qualifications for this purpose. If it is in the interest of a person under care, a social worker should consult with their colleagues and superiors. An effective way to restore clients' full life skills is to reinforce their efforts to become independent. It becomes possible due to giving a beneficiary all the information on available benefits, resulting commitments as well as ways and means for overcoming difficulties of life. A social worker has the right to cease to provide assistance if the benefits provided for by the law have been exhausted or when they are no longer needed. However, in the case of misuse of the benefits, a social worker has the right to change the form of assistance (Kodeks Etyczny Polskiego Towarzystwa Pracowników Socjalnych, 1998, Section II; Rybczyńska & Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 1995).

It is the responsibility of the person representing the social welfare institutions to treat clients equally, regardless of personal preferences and characteristics (i.e. age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, political beliefs, race, skin color, health, etc.).

An important obligation is also to keep secret information that has been obtained in the course of professional activities. Confidential information may be disclosed by a social worker only if it is justified by important professional considerations and the common good of society (Kodeks Etyczny Polskiego Towarzystwa Pracowników Socjalnych 1998, section II).

An attitude towards co-workers and maintaining relationships with representatives of their profession is important for the effectiveness of action taken by a social worker. They should take care of professional integrity and proper status of their profession, and honestly perform the duties as well as increase their professional knowledge. In order to increase the efficiency of their work a social worker has to cooperate with representatives of their profession to perform professional duties. In their contacts with co-workers, a social worker should respect the knowledge and experience of others, should be guided by objectivity and respect the principle of professional loyalty. Professional solidarity cannot affect their critical assessment of negative behaviours. In the case of co-workers breaking the code of ethics, they should take a critical stance while maintaining adequate standards, as to the place and time (Kodeks Etyczny Polskiego Towarzystwa Pracowników Socjalnych, 1998, Section III, V).

A social worker has a commitment to the institution in which they are employed. They should aim to improve the functioning of the institution and ensure the quality of the offered services. It is their duty to rationally and sensibly administer material and financial resources allocated for social services. In addition, they have to take care of the common good of the community in which they live and work. Therefore, they should support activities and self-help efforts provided by local communities, promote activity aimed at helping those in need and encourage participation in the development of social institutions and social policy making. Social workers have a duty to ensure the access to essential benefits and life opportunities for people entitled to them. Simultaneously, they are to advocate legislative changes that contribute to improving the living conditions of society and promoting social justice (Kodeks Etyczny Polskiego Towarzystwa Pracowników Socjalnych, 1998, Section IV, VI).

Undoubtedly, the social worker code of ethics presented above is a major achievement in the field of professional ethics as passing it is certainly progress towards the professionalisation of social work and raising the prestige of the profession of social worker. Codified professional ethics forms stable and solid foundation of functioning in the role of a social worker for all members of the profession (Rybczyńska & Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 1995).

Conclusion

The actions of social workers are essentially of social character, which results from the aims of social work relating to the activities of individuals, groups and social environment.

Such activity is inseparably accompanied by choices most often arising from the characteristics of a helping relationship. Therefore, social workers should be able to refer to professional ethics, which sets certain standards and constitutes a reference point necessary for solving moral dilemmas. It helps to make moral choices inextricably associated with work for the good of society. It outlines courses of action considered to be desirable and simultaneously it warns against conduct contrary to professional ethics. Code of ethics for social workers helps to preserve the moral ethos of the profession and the interests of the worker and their client. The indications contained in the code for obvious reasons cannot cover all situations. Therefore, a social worker must resolve many issues themselves primarily guided by their professional training, resulting from the knowledge, experience and skills. However, while performing professional duties, a social worker should always refer to the assimilated values, norms, and especially to the conscience.

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Summary

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A set of moral standards plays an important role in social life, as it forms the basis for assessing the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Ethics attempts to determine and resolve normative issues relating to the specific, model social situations. Thus provides a basis for establishing the rules of human functioning in the situation arising from a particular social or professional role. A social worker, whose activities are essentially social, performs many professional roles. Therefore, they should be guided by values and moral principles, arising from general ethics and specific standards contained in the code of ethics of the profession. Codified professional ethics helps a social worker in the proper performance of duties and is a reference point for resolving ethical dilemmas. Standards contained in the code of ethics uphold the dignity of the profession and at the same time indicate how the representatives of the profession should behave, and how they should not. The provisions of the code of ethics relate to the profession, relationships with co-workers, beneficiaries, employers and society. They include specific objectives and tasks of social work, understood as a practical human activity for people who need support and assistance in the fulfilment of basic needs and solving problems arising as a result of deprivation of those needs.

The actions of social workers are essentially of social character, which results from the aims of social work relating to the activities of individuals, groups and social environment. Such activity is inseparably accompanied by choices most often arising from the characteristics of a helping relationship. Therefore, social workers should be able to refer to professional ethics, which sets certain standards and constitutes a reference point necessary for solving moral dilemmas. It helps to make moral choices inextricably associated with work for the good of society. It outlines courses of action considered to be desirable and simultaneously it warns against conduct contrary to professional ethics. Code of ethics for social workers helps to preserve the moral ethos of the profession and the interests of the worker and their client. The indications contained in the code for obvious reasons cannot cover all situations. Therefore, a social worker must resolve many issues themselves primarily guided by their professional training, resulting from the knowledge, experience and skills. However, while performing professional duties, a social worker should always refer to the assimilated values, norms, and especially to the conscience.