FACTORS INFLUENCING AN ETHICAL – DECISION MAKING IN SOCIAL WORKER`S PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT
This study illustrates the results of an empirical study that comprises an analysis and remarks about sixteen case studies of social workers` practices in Bulgaria. The examined contingent is divided in five major groups. Presented case studies are incorporated by the common dilemma of the choice between ethical attitudes and laws which faces the social worker. Authors express their adherence to the postmodern paradigm in the analysis of presented problems.

Key words: Social work, Virtues, Ethical dilemmas

INTRODUCTION

The International Federation of Social Workers defines social work as a profession promoting social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment (1). From a broader perspective, social work is identified by its role as a remedy for socially excluded individuals and groups. This is most clearly seen in the position of the social worker in the institutional structure of society. Social work practice and the process of its implementation are typical social intermediary between, on the one hand, people in condition of scarcity of vital and social resources, and on the other hand, social institutions regulating civil societies and generally accepted moral norms.

Combination of the mediating role of the social worker with the possibility of protection socially vulnerable individuals and groups implies attention and understanding of several circumstances:

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- The quality and the final outcome of the social work are determined by the moral and attitudes of the workers towards the fulfillment of their professional duty.
- Low- recognized merits and insufficient payment lead to several issues from which the most important is the lack of sufficient qualification level of the personnel in terms of moral training for social work
- The focus is on the interdisciplinary training of the social worker. The need to combine both specialized knowledge in various fields of science and acquiring social skills is generally recognized. (2)

Social work practice shows that when social workers face with several issues, they base their behavior on ethical principles. The complexity and importance of ethical dilemmas as an important step in learning how to manage them are recognized. There are also cases in which, for various reasons, social workers do not admit the occurred ethical dilemmas in their practice. Their answers in those kind of situations are known: they either know the "right" answers or the discussion of this sort of problems does not make sense. The existence of such situation necessitates a special consideration and analysis of the issues related to both professional and personal factors which determine the selection

process of ethical decisions by social workers. (3)

Social work practice needs people who respect dignity, value life not because it is a requirement and a part of the rules. Ethical virtues are important because they focus on moral education and professionalism, as opposed to just training in work competences. (4)

The moral qualities and personality traits of social workers, as well as their culture and religious orientation influence the personal and professional factors that affect their (social workers) work with people. This reflects the ethical decision-making process.

The main dilemma for the social worker comes from the fact that he or she must obey the law while at the same time should assist users of social services according to their ethical aspirations. In practice, while resolving cases it is commonly observed a confrontation between the law and the ethical attitude of the social worker.

Each era has its specific ethical issues and topics. They are provoked by the dynamic development of social, cultural and technological innovations and changes in the life of the modern person. Therefore, there is no single key for resolving the cases in the social work and each issue should be considered separately, in order to make lawful and at the same time ethical decision.

The postmodern theoretical model to which we stick in this study emphasizes the idea that there must be an equality between ethics and morality in social work. Personal and professional values of social workers are an integral part of the decision-making process.

Objective:
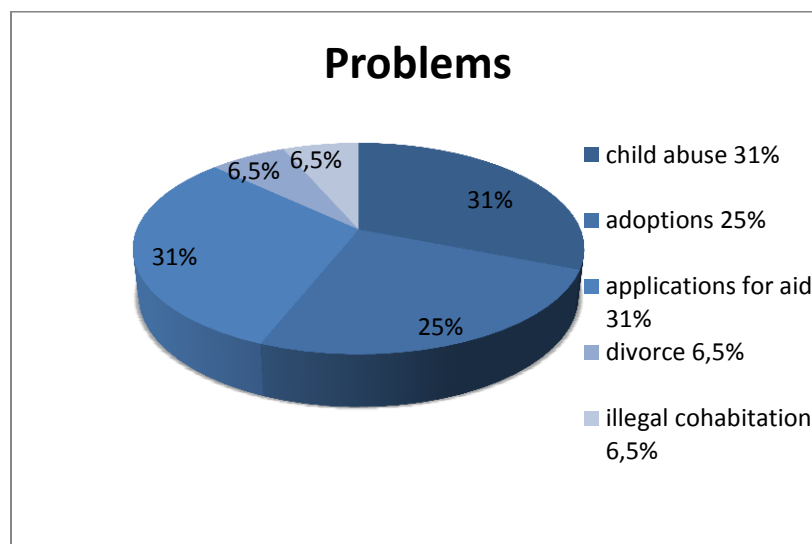The aim of the empirical research is to identify factors determining ethical decision making in social work practice.

Tasks:
1. To rationalize the norms which regulate the behavior of the social worker
2. To define the role of social worker's personality traits, determining his/her solutions.

Methods and results: In the empirical research 16 cases from the practice of social workers in Bulgaria are explored and described. The case studies provide real-life situations in the work of the experts of the "Social Assistance" Directorates in several cities in southern Bulgaria. The contingent studied is diverse but involves mainly poor families. The cases can be conditionally divided into 5 major groups that cover the main issues faced by social workers in the course of their work, namely child abuse, problems with adoptions, cases related to applications for welfare subsidies, divorces, cohabitation of adults with minors.

Results: In this study of 16 cases in the social sphere is observed the following percentage distribution of problems **(Figure 1).**

Figure 1. Problems

1. Cases of child abuse: the major problem (90 %) in the cases of child abuse is related to low living standards of families and alcohol abuse. In a small percentage (10%) the problem is due to poor communication between institutions and irresponsibility of relatives and neighbors.

2 . Problems with adoptions: The major problem in the cases of adoptions is the adaptation of the children and the parents. Financial problems are the basis of most of the cases, together with the unwieldy social system that do not contributes in order to help and support the adoption process.

3 . Cases of applications for welfare subsidies: The main problem in the case of welfare subsidies applications is rooted in the moral duty of social workers who hold in their hands the decision whether to invoke the law or follow the morality. The dilemma for the social workers in these cases is whether to follow its moral principles, thus to be beneficial to the client or to act according to the law.

4 . Cases of divorce: a major problem in divorce cases is the issue of child custody and division of property. In this case the problem is rooted in the mismatch of parents` interests, their lifestyles and the lack of dialogue.

5. Problems with illegal cohabitation: The main problem in the cases of cohabitation are cultural differences, poor communication between institutions and inadequate penalties. The problem deepens due to purely administrative and formal circumstances, which aggravate the criminal or assisting procedures.

In the examined 16 case studies, we observed situations in which social workers make decisions based on their values and morality, and thus in one way or another violate or circumvent the law. According to the statistics 20% of social workers rely on morality, and 80 out of 100 act according to the law. In 4 of the 16 cases studied, social workers based their decisions on morals, not on the law. In these cases, considering the difficult way of life of their clients social workers tend to circumvent the law and act according to their own morals and values. In many cases there are minor breaches of the law, but though them social workers can help to their clients in need. In some cases if the social worker follows strictly the law, he or she would hurt more than one person, which causes conflicts with the moral norms of the specialist. Considering the fact that the social worker works in a team with other professionals, we should take into account the personal qualities and traits

of this particular person. On their basis, the social worker decides whether to invoke their own morality or follow strictly the legal standards.

The detailed analysis of the 16 cases shows that in one way or another, poverty or insufficient financial resources are the leading factors in all cases. There is a significant percentage of parents, who as a result of lack of financial resources abuse their children. We also observed another relatively rare group of people who are financially stable and through money are trying to provide for themselves comfort at any cost. Although at first glance they all seem like family problems or life dramas, the basis of most cases are money.

In any event, the law must be followed, and each signal must be considered so as to help people. The law must be applied to each case so that the signals can be distinguished and not be defined according to established labels. Morality requires doing what is best, although each person has a different perception of morality. In the triangle: Law, child, parent - morality in the family must be sought. Last but not least, the fact that the code of ethics of the social worker is not a system of rules prescribing specific behavior in every situation should be emphasized. It can be defined as a guide for actions and a reasonable estimation of ethical situations. The specific situation determines the ethical principles that should be applied and the means for their realization.

CONCLUSION
As a result of the cases studied in the field of social work, we can define some basic conclusions. Factors determining the decision making in social work practice are the law, morality and personality traits of each social worker. In this respect, norms that shape the behavior of the professionals can be spit in two large groups - moral and legal.

Morality and law in the work of the social worker are factors with equal status and importance. This is because the personality traits of the social worker determine his or her decisions. Ethical decision is made by the team of specialists, but the individual traits of each social worker determine his or her responsibility for decision making in social work. When making ethical decisions in various situations,

the behavior and performance of the social worker are influenced by his or her personality traits.

Due to the complexity of the social work, legal and moral responsibility of the social worker in the decision making, and the risks associated with it, we consider that it is important the "ethics of social work" to find a larger and more comprehensive place in university education. The purpose of this education is to encourage critical thinking and reflexivity of future social workers, to display specific ethical issues in social work, to indicate ways and models how to deal with those problems. With this knowledge, social workers will gain more confidence in their ability to justify their own decisions and will have more clarity related to the opportunities to defend their clients. (5)

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