



Original Contribution

ABOUT CRISIS OF MORAL IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to outline the situation of social work practice in Bulgaria and the today status of the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers and its Code of Ethics. I argue that there is a crisis of moral in social work practice in Bulgaria. My personal experience and observations on the practice of social workers are rationalized in the methodology of Jurgen Habermas. This article is an attempt to bring the importance of the Code of Ethics for the professional status and professional identity of the social work profession and the role of the Code of Ethics in overcoming the moral crisis in the social work practice

Key words: Code of Ethics, ethical problems, decision ethics

INTRODUCTION

The practice of social work in Bulgaria has its own peculiarities and difficulties, but they are not connected only with the general crisis of values, with moral decay of society, nor with the general ambiguity and the apparent immaturity of social relationships. Today, obviously, it shows signs of moral crisis. The moral crisis of the society has serious consequences. In periods of social reforms special requirements have always been placed to professional activities, connected with solving the social problems of the society as a whole and of the individuals and groups exposed more than the others to the negative impact of the market processes. Social work is one of those factors that influences the state of the social area and live of citizens. That is why the creation of a Code of Ethics as a specific moral system is necessary, especially when the activity of the practitioners is aimed directly at the man and involves a high degree of individualization of their labor.

Role of the Code of Ethics for the profession of social work

The quality of the work of social workers and its consequences are largely determined by the morality of the representatives of the

profession, as well as by their attitude towards the fulfillment of their professional duties.

Achieving consistent professional ethics behavior involves work according systematic and coordinated specific moral norms and rules, justification and legitimacy of a code of ethics. The Code of Ethics in all modern professions, including social work professions is recognized as a basic ethical standard of the profession. Through this specialized code of ethics includes the idea of ethics in the practice of social workers.

Values and principles, displayed in it, as well as the standards, developed on the basis of these values, are intended to ensure the process of making an ethical decision. This however does not mean that the Code of Ethics provides universal prescriptions for behavior or strict hierarchy of values, principles and standards that govern the social worker in each case of the practice. The process of decision-making as an integral part of the practice of the social work is a process of selection. Decisions in social work are often problematic. The Code of Ethics can contribute to the realization of the "good" social work via the possibility of making ethical decisions in practice. As a replica of the shown skepticism about the importance and value of the Code of Ethics in the practice of the social work from both the mainstream public opinion, and by a number of academics, **this article is an attempt to bring its importance for the professional status and professional identity of the profession.**

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The absence of codes of ethics in the practice of social work in Bulgaria today, as well as the presence of a general notion among practitioners about their existence, in my opinion, is a manifestation of the underestimated importance of the code of ethics of social work and is one of the reasons, in my opinion, on the moral crisis in the practice of the social work.

Context of Bulgarian practice of social work

In 1995 in Bulgaria was established the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers (BASW) (1). The Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers was adopted by the General Assembly of the Association on 23.10.1999 (2). Later were elaborated the regulations for its implementation. According to the data of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the Code of the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers was ratified in 2005. Part of the main objectives of the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers is as follows:

1. To support the professional development of people, engaged in social work;
2. To assist in protecting the interests of the users of social services at national level;
3. To create an environment for professional development of the social workers by participating in the creation of standards for social work and the model for continuing education within the system;
4. To approve and monitor the compliance of the professional ethical standards;
5. To encourage and promote vocational training;
6. To represent the community of social workers in the country and abroad.

BASW is the representative body that defends the interests of Bulgarian social workers before the state bodies, institutions and international organizations. At BASW was established a *Committee on Ethics and Standards*, which monitors the compliance of the adopted Code of Ethics of the employees in the professional activities of social work. An interesting fact is that the Code of Ethics of the BASW is a literal translation of the International Code of Ethics, adopted by the IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) in 1996 and revised in 2012 (3). This document IFSW was written in a recommended format and contained guidelines for developing a separate code for each country, which is a member of IFSW, as Bulgaria through BASW is. Unfortunately, the Bulgarian Code of Ethics of the social workers has not been reviewed for over 10 years and much of the social workers have only a general idea of its existence.

What is the status of BASW today?

According to the Central Register of non-profit legal entities to the Ministry of Justice, the mandate of the Governing Council of Basra expired on 17.09.16. So the main question arises: If the Association formally terminated its existence, how it will be able to perform the functions claimed in its founding acts? What happens to the control and the implementation of the ethical principles and moral standards, set out in the Code of Ethics? While seeking the answers to these questions the following factual situation has emerged:

1. Lack of adequate assistance of the social workers in Bulgaria;
2. The absence of an ethical commission to regulate the professional relations of the social workers, linked to the difficulty of situations, that require ethical decisions;
3. Lack of the relevant and updated ethical principles and moral standards for the professional conduct regulation.

Moral crisis in the practice of the social work

Above – mentioned facts – interrupted activity of BASW, lack of a representative body, not working *Committee on Ethics and Standards*, absence of an updated Code of Ethics – lead to consequences that can be defined as a sign of the crisis with in the system of the social work in Bulgaria. Specifically we are talking about the following:

1. Due to the absence of a representative body of the social workers the Ethics Code in its version from 2005 does not contribute to the "professional status" of the social workers;
2. Presence of difficulties among the practitioners in searching the answer to the question about their own professional identity;
3. Lack of leadership for the activities of the practitioners;
4. Lack of the registry of the errors in the practice of the social workers and consequently lack of a mechanism for the protection of the consumers / clients from wrongful act in the interaction with the social workers;
5. Lack of means to discipline and regulate of the profession.

These circumstances lead to an obscure public opinion of social work and a lack of professional self-esteem and prestige of the profession and the social workers themselves. All these factors have a negative influence on the functioning of the social system and lead to the accumulation of problems and the system does not provide enough opportunities for

solving them. This, according to J. Habermas, is a sign characterizing the crisis in each system (4). The etymology of the word *crisis* refers to the Greek word κρίσις, which means "opportunity" or "solution" (5). Nowadays politicians, economists, financiers, linguists show interest to it, but they rarely pay attention to the moral side of the crisis. In a publication of gazeta.ru from 11.6.2009 S. Kiriyenko defines crisis as a crisis of confidence, situated in the humanitarian sphere (6). All, unexpectedly according to him, no longer trust each other, without any visible reasons. In the context of the humanitarian interventions in this sense talks of a crisis of speech, crisis of rhetoric, crisis of the ability of an agreement extending over the whole society. In this text, this common characteristic of the term *crisis* cannot be implemented. The basic methodological workload in the use of the term *moral crisis* we put on the understanding of Jurgen Habermas. He claims that crises are sustainable disruption of the system integration and they are not the result of random changes in the environment. Crises, he says, arise from incompatibility and inability to integrate hierarchically the imperatives, structurally inherent in the system, that lead to loss of identity of the system as an essential structure. *Referred to the practice of the social work such essential structure on which depends the stability, status and identity of the social work are the Codes of Ethics.* The fact, that social workers are less familiar with the Code of Ethics of the profession, leads to a limitation of choices in a situation requiring decision. The process of decision-making is a process of a choice. This is an integral part of the practice of the social work. Decisions in practice are often problematic due to the lack of information, time constraints, pressure from various sources and fear of accusations.

Role of the Code of Ethics in overcoming the moral crisis in the practice of the social work

The mere Code of Ethics helps the hierarchical integration of the system; its primary objective assumes this function - to contribute to embody the ideals of humanism, morality and social justice in the professional activities of social work. Compliance with the Code of Ethics of social workers is not a formality but a necessary condition for the effectiveness of their activities. (7) (see K. Benkova, 2013, 155-181).

My personal experience and observations on the practice of social workers, rationalized in the methodology of J. Habermas, give rise to defend the thesis that overcoming the situation

of the moral crisis in the practice of social workers corresponds to restoring the activity of the representative body of social work professionals and updating the Code of Ethics of the social worker. In this sense, the Code of Ethics is considered as a factor to overcome the moral crisis in the practice of social workers. The main supporting arguments of this thesis are related to the importance and usefulness of the Code of Ethics for the practice of the social work.

This in particular is expressed in the following points:

1. The importance of the Code of Ethics for professional status of the social work – i.e. how does the society "see" social work, what is its profile in mainstream public opinion
2. The significance of the Code of Ethics for the professional identity of the social workers i.e. how do they "see" themselves. Effective implementation of these two points means a Code of Ethics faced principally to practice and familiarity on the part of practitioners. This implies a set of values or general moral principles that can be adopted by all members of the profession. In a time of rapid and frequent change and increasing fragmentation of the activity, it is particularly important.
3. Importance of the Code of Ethics on the ability to guide practitioners on how to operate in practice, while protecting clients.

Social workers should not expect from the Code of Ethics detailed guidance and instructions on how to act in certain situations. This is not possible due to the complex nature of the social work and would be in total contradiction with the main feature of the concept "professional". The education, that social workers obtain at the universities, the level of competence and commitment to certain values, gives them the opportunity to make their own autonomous and informed judgments contemplated by professional problems. If the Code of Ethics becomes a comprehensive guide, the social worker will be deprived of the opportunity for personal interpretation, freedom of action and discretion. To allow Codes of Ethics truly to guide practitioners in social work without detailed rules of conduct, they should be more clearly and strongly linked with practice. The latter means continuous discussion and dialogue on values of social work in their relevance to its various modules. Moreover, I believe, it should happen during the process of education and training of the social workers. Otherwise, the Codes of Ethics remain a well -

written and well - arranged, but unusable and unused documentation.

In the context of Bulgarian reality it is observed a peculiar way of real communication with the practice. Many social services, specialized institutions or social service providers develop their own rules for the organization of their practice. The aim is to cope with the specific to their area issues. Most often they are linked to clients' rights (such as confidentiality, access to documentation, procedures for placement of persons in specialized centers), protecting clients' rights, role of the social workers in the structure. Unfortunately, they are not correlated to the values, more generally expressed in the Code of Ethics. I think it would be helpful if such content upgraded the national Code of Ethics. Thus, the role of the Code of Ethics in guiding the practice is to mark the principles of the profession and the different areas of the practice of the social work, where ethical issues may arise, including ethical dilemmas and conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the role of the **Code of Ethics as a factor to overcome the moral crisis in the Bulgarian practice** of the social workers depends on what they want to achieve with the help of it. Good, correct, useful code is not just an extended abstract of all moral requirements in the profession. But as long as it contains certain analysis of the moral mechanisms and is an expression of consciously adopted norms, the Code of Ethics surely has a matter of a tool: 1. to protect the profession from external attacks; 2. to maintain the professional identity; 3. to establish general standards by which to judge the policies and practices of the

social institutions. The Codes of Ethics should remind the social workers, that because they have specific knowledge and skills and work daily with people living in poverty and suffering from crises and problems, they have the duty to inform state authorities about injustice, lack of resources or the need to change the policy. The role and importance of the professional Code of Ethics in overcoming the moral crisis, along with education and training of the social workers are more than obvious.

This is a challenge to both the academic community and to all employees in the professional social sphere to restore the representative body of the social workers - Bulgarian Association of Social Workers and to update the Code of Ethics of the social workers.

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