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An overview of the social worker's responsibilities

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Abstract. Social assistance performs a social mediation function, i.e. social assistance is a barometer of power between different social groups. Social assistance is also an instrument through which individuals or micro-groups make their needs known to society by providing transactions between the state and society/individuals/micro-groups. Social work brings to the foreground the relationship between a world of normality and a world of marginality (Bocancea et al, 1999), and this relationship refers to professional values in social work. Professional values are a guide, but not necessarily an outcome of social work activities. This paper aims to give a brief overview of the responsibilities and difficulties of the social worker.

Keywords. social worker accountability, continuing professional development

Introduction

The field of social work is constantly evolving to address the growing complexities of societal challenges. Recent research highlights the intersection of technology, psychology, education, and organizational development as critical areas that shape the roles and responsibilities of social workers. Studies on advancements in behavioral AI (Rad, 2025), digital education resources (Mara et al., 2024), and humanistic approaches to recommender systems (Lile et al., 2024) have emphasized the integration of innovative tools into professional practices. Moreover, research on cognitive and pedagogical strategies (Rad et al., 2024a, 2024b) and comprehensive reviews on learning organizations (Rad & Bocoș, 2024) provide a foundation for understanding how social work institutions can adapt to contemporary demands. Empirical studies focusing on visual reasoning in problem-solving (Purcar et al., 2024), the impact of feedback on student outcomes (Câmpean et al., 2024), and the effects of cognitive and behavioral patterns (Marcu & Rad, 2024) further inform the professional development of social workers. Research into resilience mechanisms, such as appearance-related anxiety (Marici et al., 2024) and adaptive coping strategies (Runcan et al., 2023), demonstrates the importance of psychological well-being in professional settings. Additionally, technological innovations, including neural networks and predictive models (Rad et al., 2023a, 2024c, 2024d), have been explored for their potential to enhance decision-making processes and organizational effectiveness.

Social work supervision, a cornerstone of professional practice, has also been examined extensively. Studies on supervision frameworks (Vișcu & Rad, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), mentoring, and metacognition (Bocoș et al., 2023) highlight the need for structured approaches to support practitioners. Investigations into family functioning and student success (Gana et al., 2023), as well as distress prediction models (Delcea et al., 2023), contribute to a broader understanding of the systemic and interpersonal factors influencing social work. Moreover, interdisciplinary applications, such as graph theory in epidemic modeling (Venkatraman et al., 2021) and polygraph testing for deception detection (Rad et al., 2024e), underscore the diverse skill sets required of social workers. Together, these studies provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted responsibilities of social workers. By integrating insights from technology, psychology, education, and organizational behavior, this paper offers an overview of the core duties and challenges faced by social workers in contemporary practice.

The social worker works in a space of exchange, of transactions where conflicts inevitably arise. Transactions can be: economic (the living conditions of the poor are targeted), legal (the excluded are identified by categories defined by laws), sociological (at micro level relations identified in the micro-group integration, and at macro level - social integration) and psychological (characterizing the ways of constructing the identity of the subjects). The inconsistencies between the values and the behavior of social workers are due to the fact that, although the values are at a higher level of generality, the behaviors are specific to a situation. Value conflicts are frequently triggers for social workers to break contact with themselves and with others: with themselves - it disrupts the practice of desirable behaviors and, implicitly, the assumption of responsibility for those behaviors; and with others - it disrupts contact with colleagues, the organization where they work and with the beneficiaries. It is difficult to say whether there is a list of activities by which social workers could prevent value conflicts, often personal ethics may be opposed to professional ethics. Acculturation is the expression of the clash between the two ethics, personal and professional. In a narrow sense, at the individual level, the conflict caused by acculturation can lead to leaving the social work profession, and in a broader sense, the conflict caused by acculturation generates behaviors with negative impact on the collective work, the organization as a whole and, the consequences are aimed at the services provided to the beneficiaries, the values promoted by social work are blurred.

The responsibilities of social workers will be presented with reference to: society; the social work profession (including as professionals); the people assisted and the organization to which the social worker belongs.

1. The social worker's responsibilities towards society.

The social worker is aware of the impact of political life on professional practice; it promotes conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity both domestically and internationally. The social worker provides professional services in emergency situations and acts to prevent and eliminate domination, exploitation and discrimination of a person, group or social category by fulfilling the advocacy role. Through the advocacy role, the social worker strengthens civil society and expands democratic spaces.

2. The social worker's responsibilities to the profession and professionalism are based on openness to experience:

- professional integrity and promotion of the profession (promotes and maintains ethical standards of professional practice);

- evaluation and research (promoting policy, program implementation and practical interventions);
- continuing professional training to acquire, practice and practice skills as social work professionals.

Regarding openness to experience, DeNeve and Cooper (1998) suggested that openness is a "double-edged sword" that predisposes individuals to feel more deeply both good and bad" (p. 199). Openness to experience may favor desirable work outcomes - such as creativity (e.g., Keem et al., 2018), it may also favor undesirable ones, such as deceptive or deviant behavior (Salgado, 2002; Williams et al., 2010).

The responsibilities of social workers as professionals direct social workers' work towards lifelong learning, concern for continuing professional development. The ethical behavior of the social worker, similar to the behavior of all professionals in the medical and allied health professions (including counseling psychologists, psychotherapists) is like a "professional garment", which over time becomes something intrinsic to the professional. Ethical conduct will become more and more embedded in the subjectivity of the social worker.

The responsibilities of social workers as professionals will come to be internalized, first from outside to inside, and then, throughout their professional life, the responsibilities will flow in a two-way flow, outside-inside and inside-outside. Through the initial professional training, in the undergraduate programs, through the subjects proposed and covered, the professional behavior of the social worker is described, and then, through directed learning, through observational practice, through practice at the workplace, through volunteering, the future social worker comes into contact with the activities of the social worker at the workplace. Through modeling will lead to the practice of professional behavior, therefore the role of role models is essential for future social work professionals. The responsibilities of social workers as professionals are categorized according to three milestones:

- Self: the social worker's concern for continuing professional development; practicing ethical, honest professional behavior (not taking credit that does not belong to him/her); seeking professional supervision whenever he/she deems it necessary, recognizing those needs of supervision,
- Beneficiaries: does not discriminate (does not engage in, facilitate or collaborate in any form of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, political or religious beliefs); Practices honest behavior towards clients, without causing harm to clients;
- Organization: seeks professional supervision from the supervisor within the organization where he/she works, respects the organizational culture, the internal rules of the institution, respects colleagues, clearly and accurately represents the point of view of the organization.

Social workers' responsibilities as professionals are not without conflicts with self, clients and the organization. Conflicts with the self are expressed by the emergence of professional identity conflict, whether the social work profession is appropriate or not. The impostor syndrome, frequent questions about whether it was the right decision to study social work, plague the beginning of a social worker's work. Sometimes, social workers leave the profession and move to other professions, choose to pursue a different specialization, take training courses to acquire skills in psychological counseling and psychotherapy or other courses that open up the possibility of private practice. Dissatisfaction at work, high workload, high demands from the institution, high emphasis on all components of management (planning, organizing, coordinating, leading, controlling, etc.), insufficient preparation during initial

training from a personal point of view to become a social worker are just some of the reasons why social workers move away from their initial training and are thus prone to burnout. Conflicts with clients/beneficiaries are rooted in the dispute between the value attributed to the beneficiary, to follow the wellbeing of the beneficiary and the social worker's own wellbeing. However, in order for a social worker to "do well" he/she must first be satisfied (personally, financially, balanced with self and others, etc.). The social worker is not an endless well of resources. Hence the proposal that the curriculum of the bachelor's and master's degree programs should include subjects in which the future specialist social worker is sensitized to the challenges and difficulties of the profession and is personally prepared for what the social work profession entails. Conflicts with the organization translate into power conflicts experienced by the social workers with hierarchical persons, with colleagues, with the assimilation of the organization's values. The social worker experiences a conflict of acculturation generated by the conflict between the assimilation of social work values, organizational values and personal values. The supervisor within the organization is helpful for the beginning social worker to go through this journey from contact with the values of the organization to their integration into the social worker's value system.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming nearly every aspect of human life. It holds immense potential to revolutionize how we live, work, and communicate. Collaboration tools with AI capabilities are improving team productivity and communication (Ciorba & Pinte, 2020).

3. The responsibilities of the social worker towards the assisted persons are expressed by the assumption of behaviors that bring well-being to the clients and the social worker's permanent concern to seek professional supervision whenever he/she considers it necessary. The provision of quality services by agencies requires staff to be constantly concerned about the quality of their services, to consult with colleagues (professional intervention) and to seek supervision within and outside the organization. It is the responsibility of the organization to ensure, through internal supervisors, that social workers are supported in their work, avoiding what is called abusive supervision. If the organization does not provide an internal supervisor, it is recommended to contract the supervision services of an external supervisor, paid by the organization or, if the social worker has a form of practice of the profession (he/she has a private social work activity), in the latter case he/she is obliged to have a supervisor for the duration of the supervision period, until he/she acquires the competence of an autonomous social worker.

Abusive supervision is defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors exhibit sustained verbal and nonverbal hostile behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), such as ridiculing employees and making negative comments about them. Abusive supervision causes negative emotional and behavioral reactions from employees, including psychological distress (Tepper, 2007), increased deviance (Thau et al., 2009), per low job formance (Harris et al., 2007), minimization of emotional needs (Lian et al., 2012) and destroying self-image (Jian et al., 2012). Abusive supervision is one of the most common context-related problems in the workplace that can jeopardize employees' health and well-being (Restubog et al., 2011) In particular, when it comes to workplace abuse, leadership researchers have argued that bullying from supervisors has a more substantial effect on employee well-being and behavior than bullying from other sources.

The social worker's responsibilities towards the assisted persons are expressed by the following behaviors:

- commitment to the person assisted (promoting the welfare of the person assisted and putting the client's interests first) and respect for the principle of self-determination (helping the client to identify and develop the resources to choose the best option);
- making a written contract with the person being cared for which clearly states what services are provided;
- training and practicing ethical and multicultural competences, with respect for the culture from which the assisted persons, the beneficiaries, come from. The use of a common language with the beneficiaries, a language consistent with the meanings of the words used by the beneficiaries;
- ensuring confidentiality, respect for the privacy of the beneficiaries, and access to the files is ensured by protecting information. Access is allowed to professionals working in the multidisciplinary team, supervisors of professional social work activity and other people authorized by law;
- payment for services (to be reasonable and in line with the services provided and does not accept vouchers or services from the persons assisted);
- discontinuation and termination of the relationship with the person assisted (the professional relationship is terminated when the services provided by the social worker no longer meet the needs and interests of the person assisted. Termination is a planned process about which the person assisted has all the necessary information

4. The social worker's responsibilities to colleagues refer to interpersonal relationships in the workplace, such as:

- respect expressed by avoiding negative comments about colleagues and helping colleagues when they ask for help from each other;
- confidentiality expressed by the observance of professional secrecy;
- Interdisciplinary collaboration and consultation expressed by treating all members of the interdisciplinary case management team with respect, with the aim of making decisions for the benefit of the client;
- Disputes between colleagues are resolved amicably, respecting the right to express an opinion and understanding each other's points of view;
- consciously assuming the exercise of professional competences appropriate to the level of competence. The social worker does not undertake activities that exceed his/her current level of competence and recommends specialized services to the beneficiary.
- Involvement of the social worker when he/she notices certain undesirable behaviors on the part of another colleague, behaviors that may harm everyone.

Task conflict arises in employee interactions because of real or perceived disagreement about work content, task routines, resource allocation, or interpretation of facts (Bradley et al., 2012). The conflict literature suggests that sometimes task conflict can be advantageous, research demonstrates that the useful benefits of task conflict are elusive and, in most circumstances, harmful if not managed appropriately (Todorova et al, 2014). When task conflict is expressed as disagreement rather than debate employees will "perceive more opposition..., because disagreement communicates lower receptivity to alternatives" (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018, p. 328). In addition, task conflict frequently coexists with negative emotions, which can lead to undesirable effects, including poor job performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

In essence, task conflict depletes cognitive resources, which negatively affects personal development and creates a work environment full of anxiety.

Because task conflict imposes on employees, social workers cause them to focus a great deal of effort and cognitive resources on coping with intense opposition (Sonnentag et al., 2013; Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018), few psychological resources become accessible to "establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships" (Duffy et al., 2002, p. 332), creating the conditions for social undermining to occur. Employees, resort to behaviors characteristic of social undermining in response to task conflict such as: denigrating colleagues, doing their best to destroy it, humiliating it collectively, denigrating it to direct bosses, giving incomplete or erroneous information or apply the treatment of silence and complete ignoring. Task conflict also generates negative emotions, such as: anger, fear, antagonism, antagonism, negative reporting to work, unfortunately with consequences for the beneficiaries. The idea is that whatever is being done is not "right" anyway.

Conclusions and practical implications

The social worker's responsibilities lie on a continuum from personal to social. The appropriate view of them would be to interpret them as an emergent integration from personal to social. Too much emphasis on the social/outward, on ensuring only that the needs of the beneficiaries are met and not taking into account the needs of the social workers will lead to professional burnout and ultimately to leaving the system and practicing another profession. An overemphasis on the needs of social workers is likely to inflate the narcissism of the social worker, and ultimately the social worker will no longer find a place in the organization or the profession. It is possible that an 'emerging' balance between the two extremes could lead to what would be called an effective social work profession. But where to learn this balance? Cultivating a professional identity of the social worker right from the initial university training would lessen the danger of being situated on the two extremes and prepare the future social worker to ask for help when needed. At the organizational level, the role and importance of organizational culture and climate is noted, but not an overestimation of values without a background; a theory of forms without a background is not a solution. The vision of an organization that aims to provide social services will put the needs of the social worker and the needs of the beneficiary on the same level.

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