

# ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF SOCIAL WORKER – STUDENT OF SOCIAL WORK

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***Abstract:** The report describes possible ethical problem situations or dilemmas arising during professional performance of social worker who is at the same time student of the combined form of the first degree study program of social work. The author of this report purposely deals with several selected articles of The Ethical Codex of social workers in the Czech Republic, which she compares with students' opinions of the study programme above mentioned acquired from evaluative questionnaires, and with her own observations from the pedagogic practice.*

***Keywords:** Ethical dilemma, Ethical Codex of social workers in the Czech Republic, combined form of study, qualifying readiness, professionalism of social worker), career field, social worker.*

## 1. Introduction

The author of the report describes possible rise of ethical dilemmas related to common daily practice of social workers – students of the combined form of the first degree study programme of social work of Faculty of Sciences, Humanities and Education of Technical University of Liberec (next only FE TUL).

Most experts in the social work field, e.g. Jankovský (2003), Kopřiva (2006), Úlehla (1999), Matoušek (2003) and others, in their (expert) publications, primarily, concentrate on professionalism of social workers, their professional ethics, ethical problems of professional work connected with performance of the work but there are no studies exploring possible social worker's "split" in the role of student's study programme of social work. Most of the authors refer to possible social worker's moral "failure" only in the relationship between a social worker and a client, whereas the author of this report wants to point out emergence of possible ethical dilemmas, connected with The Ethical Codex of social workers of the Czech Rep., arising from a social worker's position in social reality, i.e. in the role of a social worker, and a student of social work at the same time.

## 2. Social worker–client relationship

As mentioned above, ethically problem situations arise especially in the relationship between a social worker and a client. Úlehla (1999) presents two possible levels of these relations that arise from relations to himself or herself, and also to other workers:

- “1. As a worker's relation is to himself or herself like as it is to his/her clients, too.
2. As the relations among colleagues are like as these relations are usually to their clients.” (Úlehla, 1999, p. 113). Apart from professional relations to a client Úlehla (1999) also describes attitudes and presents that a social worker must decide whether he should lead up more help or supervision to a client, as these two attitudes interact.

Tokárová et al. (2007, p. 287) on the other hand present facts, when a social worker in his/her relationship to a client may appear in a problem situation:

- “if a social worker’s loyalty finds in the middle of conflict of interests: a social worker and a client, a group of clients and institutions, various groups of social workers;
- if a social worker works in a social control organized by a state. For that reason he/she needs to realize his/her ethical attitudes to the role and at the same time he/she must respect professional and ethical principles of social work;
- if a social worker’s duty to defend client’s interests clashes with claims for effectiveness and utility.”

Furthermore Tokárová (2007) praises a social worker’s necessity to be independent as he/she is in an everyday contact with particular cases. But no standard or regulation offer their solutions, but his/her decision might seem to be very difficult, depressive for a social worker and it can just lead to the birth of ethical dilemmas. The fact that persons working in helping professions also transfer solutions of clients’ problems onto themselves is an integral part of moral demands to them.

Many authors dealing with professional ethics see causes of a problem situation formation or dilemmas in power and morality.

### ***The problem of power in social work***

Smutek (2006) defines power as a possibility to influence behaviour and action of other people in accordance with intentions of a worker. Kopřiva (2006) distinguishes two types of power – power assigned by an institution, and power arising under the terms of relation of help. “The greater helper’s authority is, the greater is his/her counterpart’s tendency to oppose and disbelieve. A power system leads to a mutual manipulation. If the helper takes over client’s competence in some areas of life practice, he/she can protect him from harm but can also disable him/her.” (Kopřiva, 2006, p. 40). The institutional power results from an obligation to society, whereas the second type of the power, first of all, derives from mutual client–worker relation. The power results from a client’s necessity, i.e., need to gain “something” from a social worker who has required knowledge, competent information, etc., which the client misses, and the result is that he/she gets into a position of the helpless.

Úlehla (1999) shows some other reasons why a social worker is more powerful than a client – e.g. he/she is a state deputy, represents major culture, he/she represents criteria of normality, or in many cases he even rules client’s civil rights.

Janebová, Musil (2007, p. 55-56) present that “we must perceive power in social work from a standpoint of their sources and legitimacy.” As for sources they lean to a segmentation of power in accordance with Kopřiva (2006), i.e., they distinguish institutionally assigned power derived from a relation to help – based on client’s need. The both types of power can be used in a legitimate or illegitimate way, and if there is a lack of helper’s reflection of his/her power, he/ she mostly won’t learn to handle it considerably, which, as a consequence, leads to incapability to distinguish the situations where using power is either legitimate or illegitimate.

### ***Moral qualities of social worker in general***

As Dolista, Doskočil (in Vurm et al., 2007) present, moral qualities in general touch the moral background centre of a helping profession worker. In professional ethics mainly normative features of a character are often overvalued, on the contrary psychical processes and

personality qualities are underestimated, and they are surely quite important for worker's ethical behaviour. It is a matter of moral volitional qualities (e.g. purposefulness, endurance, tenacity, etc.) and qualities of a character (e.g. responsibility, honesty, tolerance, modesty, self-sacrifice, popularity, human respect, etc.) On the basis of these two groups of qualities, moral principles and standards referring to an inner self-discipline, a social worker's moral mind is formed and shaped and also his/her moral profile.

Goldman, Cichá (2004) present only general claims for social worker's qualities (a worker of helping professions). As a result these claims are similar to those in Dolista and Doskočil. According to Goldmann, Cichá (2004, p. 69) it is about qualification, professionalism, "moral level", a communicative capability, an ability to solve complicated situations of everyday moral dilemmas, into which a social worker is drawn in by this work, and mastery to take anamnesis.

Úlehla (1999) claims that there is no list of exclusively correct demands and qualities of a worker of helping professions, as people are different. This fact reflects in a professional life of every social worker, for there is probably no situation which two social workers would solve by the same, identical way, with the same portion of feelings, emotions, empathy, etc. A social worker should always ask a question why he/she does his/her work, why he/she does it exactly this way and no another one, and at the same time it is necessary to collaborate continually with other colleagues, supervisors, or teachers of a social worker area.

### **3. Ethical codex of social workers in the Czech Republic**

In 1995 The Society of Social Workers worked out The Ethical Codex of Social Workers of the Czech Republic (next "ethical codex" only). Its formulation came out from pieces of knowledge, and function of praxis, and at the same time from requirements put on social work as a highly knowledgeable and scientifically sound discipline.

Tokárová et al. (2007, p. 295) describe the ethical codex as a normative system, which is defined to serve as an inspirational guide for members of the profession and simultaneously as a base for possible disciplinary proceedings. Together with legal, especially procedural rules, administrative regulations and etiquette, the ethical codices are important guidelines in practice for all members of the profession, who believe them, respect them, and in this way they contribute to identification of the profession.

Nedělníková (Janoušková, Nedělníková, 2008a, p. 377-378) characterizes the ethical codex as "a set of rules or principles that social workers as a professional group are supposed to follow" and she proceeds to show that "ethical behaviour is not connected only with outside behaviour rules within the bounds of the ethical codices, but also with subjective feelings of a social worker, how he/she should act so that his decision and behaviour were ethical."

#### ***Causes of breaking the ethical codex***

In this chapter the author of the report tries to point out possible ethical problem situations or dilemmas related to respecting, or vice versa breaking the ethical codex. At the same time she comes out of the definition of ethical problem situation according to Dosoudilová, Francuchová (in Janoušková, Nedělníková, 2008b, p. 496), according to them an ethical problem situation is the one "where it is clear what social worker's decision should be but to carry out the decision is difficult and ambiguous". And from the term dilemma according to Klimeš (2005), who defines the dilemma as a necessary and very difficult choice between two self-contradictory possibilities of decision.

In this chapter of the report the author draws mainly from her own pedagogic experience at FE TUL, from debates with students during teaching, and from evaluative course questionnaires of her own. It concerns on geriatrics and gerontology seminars, and Social politics ones. As the Department of Social Studies and Special Education (next DSS only) of FE TUL guarantees only a combined form of a social work study, the overwhelming part of students (87%) is employed in helping professions, so it is possible to approach breaking the ethical codex both from a social worker's position and social work student's position at the same time. Above mentioned students of the study programme see the main problems of respecting the ethical codex in connection with their role of a student of social work and simultaneously a social worker especially in the following spheres of the ethical codex – see chapter 3.1.1 to 3.1.3.

### ***Rules of social worker's ethical behaviour in relation to client***

Referring to this chapter of the Ethical Codex, the biggest problem concerning our students is the article 2.1.4, i.e. a client's right to privacy and confidentiality of his information. Within the limits of schooling students (both future and contemporary social workers) are assigned to themes of seminar works that try to confront knowledge and experience from professional practice with acquired knowledge and skill from theoretical lessons. But very often the students describe their own problems, i.e. cases from their close practice, their own clientele, which they meet every day in their professional life. As a consequence of this fact they become engrossed in the theme and many times they quote full names of the clients and some other identifying data or delicate facts, whose publication or further circulation, although "only" within the limits of school duties, happens without a client's approval. Doing this students do not become aware that they not only break the ethical codex but also the law code 101/2000, in a valid version, about protection of personal data. This mostly happens only in the first and second terms, as the students still do not know exact rules for writing professional works.

Unfortunately, there are also cases when students do not obey the above mentioned rules, and even they place hard data about their respondents or the probe into the practical part of their bachelor work. Fortunately, during running consultations heads of the bachelor works can reveal this fact in time, so the students have enough time to remove all imperfections connected with breaking the ethical codex and the law concerned with protecting personal data. If the correction performed by academic workers did not occur, they might bear consequences of such behaviour because successfully defended bachelor works are available for the public in the library of TUL.

An example from practice: A female student of the first year (second semester) has worked out a seminar work in subject Special Practice – casuistry of completed practice in an asylum for physically handicapped people. In her work she described a client R.N. in many details, including showing all his unaltered hard data, by which the client (and his family members) could be fully identified. After a following consultation with the student she was given feedback by this report's author, and she was warned about the mistakes. She was explained what she had done and what are possible ways to correct the faults.

On the basis of multiplying similar situations connected with wrong interpretation of information gained during performing of the special practice DSS FE TUL lecturers have decided to secure feedback also with selected male and female consultants of the special practice in the facilities where our students perform their special practice. DSS FE TUL lecturers have visited some of them directly in the institutions, others have been invited to a meeting held at the department. There the students and lecturers discussed the way the seminary works resulting from completed special practice should be written and how a

consultant together with the student can share its realization. On the basis of the experience in the future DSS FE TUL would like to organize regular meetings (two times in an academic year) with all (male and female) tutors of the special practice, and with representatives of DSS FE TUL.

As follows from evaluative questionnaires, discussions and seminary works of the students, they have problems with sorting out which data they can put in their seminar, bachelor, or other professional works. There are some solutions of these problem situations, e.g. one of them is completion of a compulsory course Introduction into Study and Work with information sources, immediately at the beginning of the first term where the students learn necessary information for creation special works within the bounds of study at university. Another solution that naturally proceeds continuously in all courses is a feedback from the side of academic workers who evaluate the special works.

### ***Rules of social worker's ethical behaviour related to his/her employer***

In this chapter of The Ethical Codex for Social Workers of the Czech Republic the main problem of the students is in article 2.2.1, in which a social worker should responsibly carry out duty following an obligation to his/her employer. However, some students, mostly in connection with their study, cannot keep this article in practice. In the first place those who are not head workers in their workplace, have problems with loyalty to their employer, frankly speaking, rather to a particular head worker, for he/she often disagrees with their study. There are more causes of this disapproval, e.g. more frequent absence though properly excused (of the subordinate worker) in the workplace because of the study (an unpaid day-off, holiday, study time off, ...), making less quantity of overtime hours, but the most frequent cause (according to claim of the students) is head worker's fear of rivalry and loss of his/her leading role, because after finishing study the students will have the same or even higher qualifications than the head worker himself/herself. Students complain about high work employer's – head worker's demands (e.g. tasks which are not related to their work grade or job description, or which have been already made by others) or about reluctance in case of granting study time off, which student can claim during increasing his/her qualification, in accordance with fulfilling all conditions given by law.

It is rather difficult to solve this problem as it is mostly a matter of personal problems in the workplace or an imperfect, even problematic human relationship. Some students solve this critical situation by not carrying out their duties or they carry out given tasks at the lowest possible level or they give a voluntary notice, but doing this many times they do more harm to themselves, their family or their clients.

One of the possible solutions is improving the Social Service Code 108/2006 or completion of its executive regulation 505/2006 with a chapter with clear determination which relieves, advantages etc. A social worker who is supplementing his/her compulsory education can claim in the connection with the study. But there might occur double counting of the law amendment with labour-law rules that already regulate these problems.

### ***The rules of social worker's ethical behaviour in relation with his/her profession and specialism***

Students regard articles 2.4.3 and 2.4.4 (the concrete version of these articles – see the following paragraphs) as other problematic articles of the Ethical Codex.

The article 2.4.3 (professional social work must be always performed by a qualified worker with adequate education). This article is, according to claims of students, very difficult to

respect, e.g. in connection with performing of professional practice, which is a part of study programme of bachelor study programme of social work in a combined form at FE TUL. Some of our students perform professional practice reciprocally in workplaces of their schoolmates, but owing to this article of ethical codex they cannot participate in direct social work, and so they often take part only in activities that are not much contributing as far as new knowledge is concerned, and so, in according to their claims, carrying of professional practice during employment loses its sense. Of course, we can admit that, in spite of the fact, a student learns much new information, e.g. by study of documentation, by a discussion with workers of the organizations etc. Another contribution of these practices we can see in the fact that a student in a different organization than “his/her own” behaves and reacts in a different way, he/she learns another clientele and other problems, although more or less remote ones sometimes.

This article (2.4.3) also causes problems to the students in a leading position in their professional life. These students say that they mostly have main problems with seeking sufficient financial means for acquiring, increasing or improving qualification of their subordinate workers or for employing workers who are in charge of them during the time of their raising qualification.

As a very problematic part of the Ethical Codex for our students is the article 2.4.4 – a social worker is responsible for his/her lifelong education and training. From their point of view there often occur contradictory situations and breaking this article of the Ethical Codex, primarily because of financial matter of the courses and training within the lifelong education of social workers, but also because of their time demands.

A solution of this problem is again quite complicated as it relates to monetary resources. One of the possibilities how to solve this situation is bigger activity of all participants in social work field, social service or social institutions, namely in the field of getting grants or taking a part in projects.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this presented report the author tried to outline possible ethical problem situations or dilemmas related to performance of a social worker’s profession in the role of a student of social work. The theme could be further discussed for a long time and in more details as it is a very extensive and relatively little explored field of social work, e.g. we could focus on moral qualities of students, prospective or already active social workers and think about the fact whether and how to even probe them. Another separate chapter connected with ethics, and also morality, is attempts of plagiarism. Some of the students make their work easier and shorten the time necessary for study subsequently to have more time for their family, hobbies, job or other activities but they mostly do not realize that doing this they make not only ethical indiscretion but often also break even legal standards for which they can be threatened by sanctions.

As Dosoudilová, Francuchová (in Janoušková, Nedělníková, 2008b) present when the Ethical Codex is broken, first of all it is necessary to define the cause of the breaking generally, i.e. to find out whether it is an intentional disobeying, involuntary, or negligence and who is the transgressor, i.e. a social worker, an employer, or a client. Only on the basis of exact analysis of the causes it is possible to lower, not totally eliminate, breaking of the Ethical Codex, e.g. by adequate education of social workers, sharing case work with colleagues, supervision, but also based on feedback among colleagues and superiors etc.

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