

Ethical Values in Social Work Practice: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This paper is the result of research carried out during 2012–2013 in the social work field to determine the structural framework of a welfare model centered on ethical values, based on Grounded Theory (GT) qualitative data analysis obtained through individual and group interviews with social workers in the North-Eastern region of Romania. The objective of this research was to identify the ethical values “considered by social care professionals to be constitutive of the social work profession.” We have attempted to generate a theoretical model of social work, centered on the ethical values that underpin the construction of ethical expertise in social services. We have identified a hierarchy of ethical values, which starts from the operational values “demonstrated in the discourse of the respondents and in their professional practices and leads ultimately to a set of corresponding constitutive values.” The analysis model is consistent with recent models of the development of expertise in social work, through implementing the “supervision of ethics.”

Keywords: constitutive values, operational values, ethical values, social work practice, ethics, Romania

Introduction

Values such as *freedom*, *duty*, *charity* (Sandu & Caras, 2013, pp. 72-99) and *justice* can be considered the foundations of social practices, as they operate through a series of simple actions, on which there are added legitimating structures, which justify social action against one’s conscience (Frunză, 2016; Frunză & Sandu 2016). This type of action itself is an invariant, independent of cultural context, but our perception of its significance is deeply determined by the paradigmatic model through which we interpret it. An example would be the action to redistribute the surplus value. The legitimate context for welfare practice might be Christian charity, social usefulness, social justice as fairness, etc.

In this research, we encountered a number of instances of social development centered on ethical values, in relation to social practice. The objective of this research is to identify those ethical values considered by social care professionals to be constitutive of the social work profession in Romania, as well as those values that appear to be operational within the current practice of social services, considering the responses of the interviewees. We attempt to generate a theoretical model of social work, centered on the ethical

values that underpin the construction of ethical expertise in social services. We consider this model to be reliable for Romanian social work context of practice, but also it can be used as a start point in reflection on ethical framework for social work system from different countries.

Romanian context of ethics expertise in social services

Starting from the current reality of ethics expertise in the medical field, in which it appears necessary, due to an awareness of the ethical dilemmas that can affect medical practice (genetics, reproductive medicine, palliative care, emergency medicine, organ transplantation technology and nanotechnology), we consider such ethical reflection (accompanied by the development of ethics expertise) equally appropriate in social services, especially in social work (Frunză, 2016; Caras, 2014; Frunză & Sandu, 2016). At least in Romania, such expertise is not yet acknowledged by most professionals, ethical reflection being reduced to a minimal ethical compliance to the general standards for public servants (codes of conduct). In Romania there is a deontological code at the level of The National College of Social Workers (equivalent to national associations of social workers from other countries), but the institutions that provide social services (both private and public) do not have specific ethical guidelines in providing services (except hospitals). There is no specific national legislation on social work research or social work practice ethics, so no unitary framework for ethical guidance in social services providing. It may prove advantageous to have a larger discussion on the deontological code of social workers from Romania, but in the present paper we will refer shortly the context:

The deontological code of the social work profession, published in the Official Gazette of Romania, applies uniform across the country, being the code of CNASR/NCSWR (National College of Social Workers from Romania). CNASR is based on just deontological code that by its structure supports the ethical principles—such as the principle of autonomy, the principle of beneficence, the principle of non-maleficence, and nondiscrimination.

In the following conditions, we consider necessary the construction of codes of ethics in Romanian social work organizations and the establishment of ethics committees to ensure the respect for ethical principles and compliance to ethical practice of welfare. Starting from Eggleston's (2005) distinction between the virtuous individual and the ethics expert, we consider that the social work practice (at least in Romania) is rather an application of ethical principles—which are dominant at the community level through social policies. Without involving an ethical reflective action on the ethical consideration of practice, we can see an analogy between Eggleston's virtuous individual and the social worker as professional—mostly because both of them have practical knowledge of how to implement their ethical values. Both Eggleston's virtuous individual and the social work professional need ethical guidance or supervision.

Methodology of Research

Method: Grounded Theory

We developed individual interviews and analysed the subsequent data using a Grounded Theory (GT) qualitative approach. The research aims not to validate a hypothesis but to identify the meaning given to ethical tools by the professionals who are using them. The interview guide was progressively revised and improved in the GT data interpretation analysis. During the construction of conceptual categories, clarifications were necessary and they were included in the interview guide.

For this current analysis we used a constructionist Grounded Theory (GT) method for the analysis of collected data and theory development. This constructionist GT approach aims at understanding the constructs through which subjects operate and give meaning to their actions; it includes elements of deconstruction, which is used in the language analysis and identification of metastories, which become the referential to the practice of subjects.

Researchers and participants alike reconstruct the data, with the researcher having an active role in tinting discursive elements considered

by him/her as significant. We concur with the idea that such analysis could be understood as having a large subjective nature of the interpretation. Some can consider this nature as bias when referring to the validity of the results. In this regard, we argue that the constructionist sociology is not necessarily oriented towards the validity of the results, but rather the generative potential of the model resulted as starting future research on the same topic. The generative nature of the methodology aims at theoretical construction through inductive strategies that tend to construct a new and more and more coherent theory.

During an inductive process, conceptual categories are created with an increasingly high level of generality, which help explain the research topic. Glaser and Strauss describe analytic induction as concerned with the generation and demonstration of a causal theory to represent a specific behavior, which is limited, precise, integrated and universally applicable (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, p. 10). The coding process starts with reading data from the interview transcripts, accompanied by notes on the transcript, such as notations, comments and observations. The categories' sources must clearly derive from the research data while, being above their level of generality, they may refer to similar data later.

In this particular research, two researchers were responsible for the data analysis. The data interpretations were based on alternative reading of the data to establish a consensus about the possible significance of those.

Research thematic axes

The research started by reflecting on the existence of a social work system centered on ethical values, and wishing to identify the ethical values that underpin this social work from the perspective of the professionals interviewed.

The focus group employed an unstructured interview technique based on a series of thematic axes to encourage specialists to report their ethical values and how they "punctuate" their professional practice. The individual interview's thematic axes included the use of tools in social work practice and

the analysis of their potential ethical components. It focused on the construction of *autonomy* through informed consent, inasmuch as it exists, and the specific tools used in welfare practice (e.g., *individualized service plans, individualized protection plans, etc.*) The customization of the interviews was achieved by including values such as *autonomy, fairness, and responsibility* within the thematic axes, from which respondents were free to refer to any other values that they considered as justifying their own practice.

We addressed questions related to the contribution brought by social workers to the achieving of welfare of the beneficiary development, what is the social worker understanding of the autonomous behavior of the social work clients—being asked to describe such situations in which social workers contributed to the clients' autonomy construction. We asked similar questions related to dignity, justice, responsibility. Also, we asked the participants to refer to the professional values they adhere to and the relation between the professional values and their own personal values.

Participants and data collection

The research was based on individual and focus group interviews. There were two focus groups, attended by a total of 20 social workers, with various practical and management functions in both public and private organizations, in the fields of family and child protection, elders' social work, adult training, and probation. There was one individual interview, which was conducted with a social worker in the family and child protection field. The selection of participants was based on the snowball method; we made an appeal to a social workers' National College representative, who invited participants from all active fields of social practice from the research region. The most important criterion of selection was experience in the field. Considering gender, because Romanian social work practitioners are mainly representative of feminine gender, this gender was predominant in the sample. Participants ranged between 10 and 20 years.

Following the first data analysis, we

identified the saturation of data. We concur with the Strauss and Corbin suggestion (1990) that saturation is a “matter of degree,” sustaining that saturation should be more concerned with reaching the point where it becomes “counterproductive” and that “the new” that is discovered does not necessarily add anything to the overall story, model, theory or framework (Strauss, Corbin, 1990, p. 136; Mason, 2010). Data collection was conducted from August 2012 to November 2013 in the North-Eastern region of Romania.

Discussions, Ethical Concerns, and Limits

The research was conducted with non-vulnerable individuals who were representative of social work practice from private and public institutions. No stress, physical, psychological, social, or economic harm was incurred by participation in this research. The data collected did not relate to illegal activities.

In terms of methods for providing anonymity or confidentiality, the following parameters were established: The transcription of the interviews did not contain any identification data of the subjects. The subjects were informed about the confidentiality of the data. In the cases in which the subjects mentioned data that could lead to their identification or of the affiliation institution, those were anonymized at the data transcription. The records from voice recorders were deleted at the end of the project.

After the GT analysis of the data, we established meetings (workshops) with social workers, including the participants in the initial interviews (individual and groups interviews). In these workshops we presented and discussed the results of the research. The participants in workshops generally agreed with our analysis, and we considered in the final paper some of their opinions that were quite different from our initial perceptions. In accordance with Strauss & Corbin (1990), the data are characterized as having a specific context, being specific to welfare practice in the North-Eastern Romanian region. The potential for generalization refers to the model proposed, which can be extracted from

the theoretical analysis of social work centered on ethical values, and may constitute a justification for future projects aimed at implementing the “supervision of ethics” in social services.

As limits, this research has an exploratory value, with large interpretative characteristics. Given this research nature, the investigator’s opinion strongly influences the research results. In order to diminish the influence of researcher’s opinion on the data, we used the triangulation of methods and researchers (Denzin, 1970). Another limit is the representativeness of the participants, who were selected only from the North-Eastern region of Romania. The generated model could stand as a starting point for some larger studies, but we do not have data to validate the model for another social, cultural and professional context. In this current paper we use the term “beneficiary/beneficiaries,” which has the meaning of “persons who benefit from social services, as clients of social work systems; socially assisted persons.” The term “beneficiary” is used in the Romanian legislative framework.

Data analysis

Open coding

By studying the responses of the interviewees, we were able to establish the defining categories for the content analysis. During analysis, we selected from each response the representative keywords for each category. The working tool can be represented in a table containing four items of analysis: categories; keywords; keyword frequency in speech of interviewees; and the text itself, which lists keywords. The frequency of keywords in the text could determine the importance of the role they played in the analysis. The initial coding led to the identification of a number of sets of keywords, which were subsequently categorized as shown in Table 1. We concur with the idea that in qualitative research, the frequency of keywords may have no bearing on how important each theme is; nevertheless, the repeated appearance of a term or its synonyms could lead us to the interpretation of a high importance of a specific fact/thing/value to which they refer.

Table 1: Categories & keywords – open coding stage

Category	Keywords
“Social work practice focused on ethical values”	defining social work, self-discovery, lack of reflection on the significance of the practice, native over-qualification, interpretation of the law, humanity, customer welfare, vocation, helping others, work, involvement and responsibility, skills, self-awareness, vocation, change, empathy, reorientation;
“Responsibility for the welfare of the client”	welfare, awareness of responsibility, respect for children's rights, balance, awareness, community self-help;
“Welfare as a manifestation of relational autonomy”	material and financial instruments, crisis relief, vocation, education, addiction, complacency, disability, needs, victims of the system, assisted living, assistance perpetuated and learned, a helping hand, providing, benefits, system, beneficiary, perpetuating, vicious cycle, smoothness of social system, beneficiaries, customer benefits, customer perspective, financial benefits, grants, assistance, counseling, empowerment, lack of autonomy, unethical system, professional ethics, insincere beneficiaries, minimum income, unemployment, unethical, beneficiary of trade, state of crisis, financial aid, responsibilities, legal obligation, prevention of potential crisis, inappropriate;
“Professional autonomy of the social worker”	conflict, professional, own organizational values, legislative limitations, conflict of values, compliance values, professional values, conflicting values, the rule of law, professional heteronomy, professional autonomy, entrepreneurship, advocacy.

Axial coding: Constructing categories

Category 1: Social work practice focused on ethical values

An analysis of social work focusing on ethical values requires a redefinition of the profession and a reconsideration of the self as a professional.

“I think we need to get the definition of social work.” (SW1, FG2013)

“I think I need to find myself as a professional.” (SW 2, FG2013)

“I confess that I’ve never asked what social work means.” (SW3, FG2013)

Social workers understand the nature of professional ethics, suggesting that the central value of welfare practice is *helping others*. This “helping” orientation is a personal calling for professionals. We believe that the respondents focus their professional activities on those values that can be made into an ethics of care. Along with *care* and *vocation*, respondents identified *humanity* as a constitutive value of the social work profession. *Humanity* is understood as a framework for interpreting and humanizing the law, in order to ensure customer well-being.

I think, regardless of the institutions in which they work, the social worker is a person who must be overqualified, [must have a] native overqualification that cannot be gained in years of study. I think this skill takes humanity; and if we have humanity, we must use and interpret the law to ensure the customer’s welfare. (SW 13, FG2013)

Caring as a “calling” can be interpreted within a Weberian paradigm of the professional as a vocational person, which involves a move beyond mere bureaucracy to the internalization of professional values and their translation into practice.

“Beyond being a job, it is a vocation and its essence lies in helping others.” (SW3, FG2013)

We consider that, beyond the ethical standards of the profession of social work, its practice is based on ethical actions, even if they do not always involve ethical reflection. In practice, we are speaking of an “ethical act,” which stems from the internalization of constitutive values. In this case, the values are derived from charity and its deconstruction (Sandu & Caras, 2013, pp. 72-99): solidarity, caring, and responsibility towards the Other (Levinas, 1969). The theoretical construction of social support systems can be identified as having core values that come from an ethics of justice, which configures social policies on the principle of redistribution and equity (Arneson, 1989, pp. 77-93; Rawls, 2001). This approach is in contrast with that of the intuitive professional vocation.

We identify in each respondent’s discourse a number of ethical values constitutive of his/her profession, as he/she has internalized these in his/her work: namely, *commitment* and *responsibility*, which confirms our previous assessment that oriented social work practice in relation to an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1977, pp. 481-517; Nodding, 2002). Starting from this discourse, we cannot make interpretations concerning actual practice; it only relates to personal perceptions regarding this practice, which we consider the foundation of self-esteem, with self-motivational potential for professionals. We see these statements more as constituting a metamodel of the concept of the “professional” rather than the result of reflection on their practice, which, moreover, the respondent reports as being spontaneous, during the focus group.

The respondent (Social Worker 3) refers to an ethics of work, which he considers to be of supreme value and which correlates to the efficiency of the phrase “near impossible to accomplish anything.” The ethics of work within the Weberian paradigm (Weber et al, 2002) is based on the individual’s spiritual duty to others and to divinity.

“Without [a sense of] involvement and responsibility at/in the work,

it would be near impossible to accomplish anything?” (SW 3, FG2013)

Success is not a direct result of labor, but as it is the result of divine grace, work is essential to a spiritual mode of living. The fact that this respondent places supreme value in work can be interpreted in terms of a metastory, in which work grounds the individual as a professional and puts him/her in relation to pseudo-transcendence. Even though the respondent did not appeal to spiritual values, the way he/she legitimizes *work* as a *supreme value* actually spiritualizes it, leading us to believe that—within the inner horizon of respondent—the statement is a spiritualist one.

“Work is of supreme value.” (SW3, FG2013)

Social Worker 3 appealed to the same notion of the *vocation* of social workers who support beneficiaries, specifically by developing skills of empathy that allow a reorientation of conduct after identifying needs, in order to produce change. The objective of this is to build social worker autonomy, both reflective and relational, and, based on this autonomy, to drive forward the process of change.

Unlike in the previous respondent’s discourse, this respondent (Social worker 4) rejects paternalism, and is aware of the need for a correlation between respect for the autonomy of beneficiary and professional expertise, based on empathy. Professional expertise is based on the responsibility of the social worker towards the beneficiary, and towards his/her own professional practice.

“[It is important] to empathize with him/her [the beneficiary] as a social worker, because what you think is good for him/her might not be in agreement with what he/she needs.” (SW4, FG2013)

The rejection of paternalism and of offering guidance to beneficiaries, in order that social workers can approach the specificity of their problems, was

confirmed in the interviews conducted individually, allowing us to consider the data saturation criterion to be satisfied.

The expectations of the people with special needs who come to us must be accurate, and they must know that, in the social work system, we have obligations too. A social worker is one who provides solutions to problems, but for the more legislative problems he will give you information and help you find solutions to solve the problem yourself. You cannot expect to get solutions from the social worker without doing anything yourself. (SW, Individual Interview 2012)

This also emphasizes the references to legislative framework as a particular dimension of social work, which will also emerge from the discourse of the focus group participants and will be further analyzed.

Category 2: Responsibility for the welfare of the client

In regards to the second category identified, Social Worker 3 answers relied on the idea of responsibility for the client’s welfare, *welfare* that we interpret as an operational value derived from the respect for *dignity*. The priority of this value is assigned by the respondent as a value of (*professional*) *duty* that the respondent internalizes and personalizes. On the other hand, the statement may be interpreted as referring to a generic “us” (i.e., the community of social workers).

“Their [the beneficiaries] welfare directly concerns us.” (SW3, FG2013)

The respondent’s discourse regarding the definition of “welfare” here becomes divergent and brings into the definition of welfare two ideas from contradictory ethical systems, namely an ethics of care—“the well-being”—and an ethics of justice—“children’s rights.”

“I see welfare as well-being, respect for child rights.” (SW3, FG2013)

Another attempt to define welfare was made by another social worker, with a role as a probation officer. The officer saw welfare in terms of a balance between obtaining desirable outcomes after intervening on behalf of the beneficiary, and benefiting from existing resources without erasing the moral agency of the subject and his/her respect for his/her own autonomy. The above selection quoted from the respondent discourse could expose how the intervention produces wealth, independent of the beneficiary; therefore, we consider the statement as having a paternalistic nature, denoting a “peripheral centrality” of the beneficiary of social services. The term “peripheral centrality” (Cojocar, 2009, pp. 87-98) covers a cognitive dissonance between the centrality of the beneficiary in professional discourse, which is accompanied by their being sent to the periphery of practical interest, by eliminating the moral agency of the beneficiary.

The term “balance” used by Social Worker 4 in the following fragments also encapsulates how the social worker community reacts to the situation of the beneficiaries, and the social worker’s awareness of the limits to the aid beneficiaries can receive from the community. The *balance* suggested as constitutive of welfare can be interpreted from a utilitarian perspective, as the maximum of good that a society can exercise for the individual. In terms of the compensation that a society provides for the disadvantages of the beneficiary, this discourse introduces the idea of subsidiarity, as “balance.” The society can offset some of the disadvantages, but it is the responsibility of the individual to act in accordance with the society; the society’s compensation therefore aims to be limited. The result of this approach could be interpreted in terms of the construction of the relational autonomy of the individual.

What welfare means for me is that balance between what is desired and what is possible. ... A balance that makes the person aware of what can be done for him/her, what the

community can do in order to help him/her. (SW4, FG2013)

Responsibility is identified in the discourse of respondents from two perspectives; the first of these is the responsibility of the parent, which is desired and sought after by the community in the form of community work and the childcare institutions that cover the cost of protection.

There are legislative changes in Law 272 (Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children’s rights) [meaning that], for parents who have children in care, the parent may be required to perform 40 hours of community service, but this depends on how municipalities manage their work and services like these.”(SW10, FG2013)

A second form of responsibility inferred from the discourse describes the social workers’ own professional responsibility. It has a double nature, one side being oriented to the system and the other directly to the beneficiary. We see the call to co-responsibility (Jonas, 1984) in terms of the social worker who is aware of the need for cooperation between the various agents in the field, in order to carry out professional tasks, the result of which is addressed to the social services’ beneficiaries (Social Worker 11).

Our goal is to reintegrate children from the care system with their families of origin, but this does not depend on us. It depends on other services offered by local communities. It depends on the individual and their degree of dependence.” (SW11, FG2013).

The fragment below exposes the difference between the theoretical specifics of social work and its actual practice, whereby the literature is not consistent with the possibilities of implementing the methodologies and best practice guides, leading to professional dissatisfaction, which is also generated by the lack of success. As a manifestation of their

professional responsibilities, social workers desire the cultivation of a practice culminating with the client's empowerment. This is achieved by developing a progressive individualized plan to help in identifying the crisis, offering counselling to establish the needs to get out of it, and monitoring clients to ensure their empowerment is effective. We prefer to give the discontinuity in the manifestation of professional responsibility the term *clipped responsibility*.

It is lovely to read in the literature about successful cases, but I do not know if I could talk about a successful situation in which I have worked with a client by the book, in a professional manner, starting from the identification of the crisis situation and proceeding to help the client, to offer him/her counselling for different situations, such as that of identifying a proper job, to monitor his/her evolution. ... It is very difficult ... (SW11, FG2013)

Category 3: Welfare as a manifestation of relational autonomy

Elsewhere in the respondents' discourse, *welfare* is defined in terms of *relational autonomy*, as opposed to the definition that is supposed to be given by beneficiaries: that of *financial and material autonomy*. Relational autonomy consists mainly in finding solutions to encourage an awareness of the situation in which the recipient finds themselves, and strategies to overcome it. The role of the agent of change, which the social worker assumes, is related to the empowerment that the beneficiary produces in order to manage potential future crises. Basically, this empowerment aims at establishing and developing moral agency. This moral agency is not absolute, but situational—subjective decisions being dependent on all social constructs—and undertaken by the individual within his/her social environment.

Welfare does not mean that the social worker brings financial and material aids. Using tools, materials, and financial instruments, that our

country legislative framework gives you, allow you to take a person out of their crisis moment. Then, by working with him/her, having the necessary vocation and training in the field, you can manage to make him/her aware of his/her situation, and help him/her overcome the crisis and identify possible solutions. (SW5, FG2013)

The idea of independence from welfare instruments is in line with that of the constitution of the beneficiary's relational autonomy. Using the respondent's phrase "*but not necessarily*" in relation to the heteronomy generated by welfare tools can—in our view—be an indication that the issue of autonomy is managed for rational discourse, but not necessarily internalized as a practical value.

But not necessarily creating a dependency on these tools (social work tools). (SW 5, FG2013)

Auto-vulnerability is a survival strategy of beneficiaries who indulge in being considered victims of the system, having been taught to be assisted by society. Victimization strategies are perpetually taking on a trans-generational character. At its most fundamental, we can talk about the strategy of the beneficiary as being a result of an expressive autonomy-speculating welfare system, based solely on the provision of benefits in logic of care. Care without accountability is seen as generating a lack of autonomy. The definition of autonomy, which the respondent him/herself uses, concerns a socially acceptable, relational autonomy: the individual's ability to function effectively and independently in the social environment.

The respondent indicates the possibility of failure in the self-determination of the moral agent, which is not rendered to the beneficiary but is voluntary oriented, so as to allow him/her to obtain benefits. The precariousness of the social existence of the beneficiary may be the result of his/her own choosing, after which, according to Rawlsian theory, society has no obligation to compensate their

disadvantage; on the contrary, this compensation can even become a source of inequity. Social work that works exclusively on the basis of an ethics of care, without taking into account the responsibility of the subject to self-care, perpetuates the vulnerability context of the beneficiary and maintains their dependency on the system.

Many of those we deal with indulge in the situations in which they find themselves; beyond the inability to identify their needs, let alone their action strategies, they are indulging. (SW2, FG2013)

There is a tendency to see themselves as victims of the system. So they have learned to go there, to be assisted. Even though the public and private institutions do nothing but give a helping hand and offer all kinds of benefits, it creates nothing but dependency—a dependency between the system and the recipient which is perpetuated through generations. It is a vicious circle. (SW2, FG2013)

We also identify, in the discourse of one of the respondents (Social Worker 2), the idea that the language practices associated with social work constitute a further vulnerability for the beneficiaries. Simply by naming them *beneficiaries*, certain expectations of the benefits are constituted, creating a favorable context for a dependency system and the rejection on the part of the beneficiaries of the need for relational autonomy.

If we're talking about the smoothness of the social system, then we should also refer to the terms, because we speak of "beneficiaries." The term was changed from "client" into "beneficiary" and now we talk of beneficiaries for the purposes of benefits—benefits and nothing else to come ... (SW2, FG2013)

We can correlate this with the discourse of legal content semantics; by using terms that only cover the material benefits that a subject is entitled to receive, the specific character of the actual material practice that the respondents are assumed to provide is limited to the material aid given to beneficiaries. The functions of support, counselling and empowerment are substituted for a process of direct allocation of resources, which can give the illusion of a temporary settlement of the crisis, but with the risk to beneficiaries of a chronicity of vulnerability and dependence on the system.

From a beneficiary's perspective, there are certain expected benefits, allowances and grants, and less of a social meaning, (i.e., counselling to help clients to help themselves, so that they can become autonomous. But that does not happen. (SW2, FG2013)

One of the respondents considered the system based on social benefits and [material/other] benefits to be unethical, as it failed to identify a link between the values of the social welfare system, as established by the regulations (as of the date of the interview), and his personal values.

The system is unethical, even if we are ethical, everyone in their own workplace. (SW10, FG2013)

We can identify a double approach to a sense of *ethical welfare in practice*, with assumptions taken from a model of care—focused on care and maintenance of the status quo of the beneficiary—but also from a social justice-oriented model. In this model, the entitlement to receive benefits, which would meet the terms of the law, should be subsidiary to other practices centered on the equitable distribution of resources, which the community itself can mobilize for the beneficiary, and on the beneficiary's responsibility towards his/her own social status.

In our opinion, the idea of a *lack of sincerity* on the part of the beneficiary, discernible in the

respondents' discourse, actually shows the existence of the expressive autonomy of the beneficiaries, which, as we have noted, is geared towards meeting their needs at the expense of immediate-term strategies to resolve the situations they are facing. Legislation can be an advantage in the maintenance of addictive behavior towards materials from the beneficiary and the cultivation of a subsistence strategy based on it. The respondent emphasized that the establishment of a networking of addiction is supported by the legal permissiveness around addressing the same problem to a number of different social services providers.

Beneficiaries are insincere; they take into account legislation. They come and say, 'Anyway, if you do not give us money for supplies, we'll go to... [Author's note: interviewee nominates a certain state institution].' (SW10, FG2013)

Respondents are particularly critical of the social welfare system by providing a minimum income guarantee (MIG). It is considered unethical in the sense that it perpetuates inequalities between social groups that adopt a strategy of subsistence based on benefit hunting and social groups that place work at the center of their strategies to access resources.

I think we're among the few states that have a guaranteed minimum income. As a social worker, if I become unemployed and the state did not give me any guaranteed minimum income, I'd remain unemployed; but then I'd have to deal with the situation. This system [MIG] is unethical. (SW10, FG2013)

I'll give you a specific case: It is clear to you as a social worker that you have to deal with 'professional beneficiaries' who hunt social services because they do not want to get involved or to make the minimum effort required to change

their situation or state of crisis, because I know they receive aid from the state. (SW10, FG2013)

They [Beneficiaries] must assume family responsibilities, community, and so on because the new law requires us, upon their notification, to try to prevent a potential crisis. (SW10, FG2013)

The interviewee in child protection referred to a particular case from [his/her] own practice, exemplifying the possibility of building a beneficiary's relational autonomy, which correlates with his/her ability to assume responsibilities:

The young girl was unable to assume such responsibilities. A child requires the ability to exercise responsibility and take them on. (SW, Individual Interview 2012).

This statement on the state of the child was in favor of the formation and development of autonomous behavior; in this situation, it is all the more necessary as the child's lack of judgment can be a factor directly influencing the risk of future pregnancy (Matei, 2014, pp. 111–118). The interviewee basically confirms the centrality of autonomy as the key value of welfare practice, referring to autonomy in relational terms. We note the relative ignorance of the ethical dimension of autonomy as informed consent, and in terms of the ability of the beneficiary to develop its own moral agency. The data obtained from this individual interview was supported by the focus group, indicating a saturation model.

Category 4: Professional autonomy of the social worker

We noticed that the legal framework is still recognized as a limitation to the professional autonomy of the social worker; "the corset" is associated primarily with practice in public services. The respondents' discourse indicates a fundamental understanding of the difference

between value-based social work, attributed to the private sector and recognized as professional, and social work based on the simple application of minimum regulatory frameworks, as seen in public institutions. In our opinion, the difference comes from the fact that public institutions are obliged to implement public policies that come into force for all beneficiaries, at least at a basic level (utilitarian approach), while non-governmental organizations are able to select beneficiaries based on their claims, the mission criteria of the organization, and the project for which funding has been obtained.

Moreover, the contradiction between the personal values and professional values of the organization can be seen as ambivalent. These statements from two of the respondents are contradictory:

There is a conflict: on the one hand, to be professional at work, in an organization with its own values, or on the other, to work after you a legislation that constrains you, as we all know how to work at... [Author's note: interviewee nominates a public institution]. (SW10, FG2013)

In terms of a conflict of values, I would not be able to give such contrary values; I personally do not see a conflict. (SW11, FG2013)

I see my values as contrary to those of the organization. It is true that we cannot select beneficiaries, but there are measures and solutions to individualize services; not all those who come to us are in need of protection. (SW11, FG2013)

The statements of these two respondents generate a series of dilemmas that focus on the source of contradiction raised by respondents. They underline the opposition between the values imposed by the legal framework, based on (our point of perspective) a utilitarian ethics, and the professional values, ranging from an ethics of justice

and liberal perspective (empowering the client) to the promotion of an ethics of individual autonomy (relational). But they also demonstrate a difference between the position of professionals in relation to the social values of their own professional practice, and the position described by the literature in terms of good practice.

We have identified two facets of *professional responsibility*: first, a *responsibility to the welfare system*, as it is covered by legislature, and second, to *the welfare of the client*, according to their operational definitions of "professional" and not necessarily as acquired by the client too.

We can also notice differences occurring in the discourse towards the legal system. On one side, there is the expression of desire to demonstrate autonomy in relation to the system, through the intervention involved in changing laws, practicing advocacy and on behalf of the beneficiary. On the other hand, the same discourse contains references to the heteronomous position of the professional, as expressed in the phrase "you are not there to comment [on the law]," which confirms the moral status of client.

Yes, indeed there may be inconsistencies between your personal opinions and workplace context, but you must follow the law. You are not there to comment on a client's situation. (SW12, FG2013)

My concrete values conflicted with the concrete situations in which I personally felt that those people needed care and personal assistant. That does not prevent me as a professional from taking the necessary steps to approach decision makers, to try to help this group. This has involved legislative proposals, lobbying and advocacy to politicians and representatives of the system, and not least, this year in the summer, there were a few regulations that tried to cover these needs. (SW12, FG2013)

Generating Axes of Social Work Focused on Ethical Values

In the axial coding process, we have grouped the identified categories in ways that will help us later in the step of generating the theoretical construction of a paradigmatic model. These axes of social work focus on ethical values from the following perspectives:

- *Legislative perspective*, which generates a rights-based social work model (i.e., the rights of the beneficiaries). This model aims for a retributive and restorative practice, designed to compensate for social inequality through an affirmative attitude towards the poor. Between these practices, there can be observed additional compensatory policies regarding the minimum guaranteed income, which should at the least allow a partial compensation for the inequality of opportunity in access to welfare. Through the minimum income, society has a duty to compensate those categories of beneficiaries, which, due to their specific vulnerability generators, are unable to be self-sufficient. However, this model is seen as a generator of inequity in itself, perpetuating dependence and self-vulnerability in some beneficiaries, who voluntarily choose welfare dependence as a lifestyle.
- *Idealized perspective*, grounded in the theoretical models originating from sociology, psychology and communication sciences. This view is employed by the social worker in the cultivation of self-esteem, arguing the social and ethical value of social practice. This perspective refers to a desirable aspect of the practice, a model of conduct, based on professionalism and best practice. The model is referred to as conflicting with current practice, which is declared to be oriented around rights-based social work.

- *Professional perspective*, which concerns their own position in the welfare system. The social worker sees himself/herself as a person of vocation, identifying the social utility of his/her work and the deeply humanistic character of the practice. The social worker is described as corseted by an imperfect legislative framework, which he/she considers to be deeply unethical and contrary to the social worker's own morals as transposed into the ethics of professional responsibility.
- *The perspective of effective practice*, which aims for a balance between the beneficiaries' rights model, the principles of good practice established in the literature, and the context in which the practice takes place.

There is the sense of a lack of consensus on the dominant ethical paradigm that acts as a benchmark within the practice of welfare services; at the discursive level, this conflict of values is recognized but poorly understood. The conflict is a tripartite one, in that it includes the values assigned by the individual to the profession and to the individual's own role identity; the values of the operational framework to which the individual belongs, where the practice is conducted; and the standards of good practice that come from the organizational literature and the constructed frames of reference. We refer therefore to such an anticipatory socialization process of the social worker as being responsible for the transposition of ethical values into social action (Cojanu, 2014 p. 9–10).

The mission of social services providers should be the construction of a moral agency on the part of the beneficiary. In addition to the social workers' discourse, there is a meta-discourse of providers of social services (i.e., the organizations), which sets the parameters for conducting social intervention based on public policy resulting from the implementation of various ethical paradigms.

Theoretical Generation Stage

Based on the analysis of previous stages of coding, we were able to build a model for understanding social work practice centered on ethical values. This representation of social work is divided into different ethical paradigms, generating a conflict of values. This conflict of values is simultaneously affirmed and denied by the respondents. We consider that the contradiction can be resolved from the perspective of the logic of “a secret third party” (Nicolescu, 2007), which essentially states that a certain level of discourse can act as a medium between two opposite terms of a contradiction, but that it is not on the same ontological level as the first two. The solving of any dilemma is achieved by the appeal to the existence of another ontological level, which is actually invoked in speech. Basarab Nicolescu takes from Lupascu the idea of a secretly included third, according to which the opposition between contradictions is resolved by the existence of an included secret third, which is in another plane of reality. Starting from the unifying claim of transdisciplinarity, we notice the incompleteness of the deconstruction of dialectic, between essence and appearance, where a medium term may occur, situated in a different term of reality. From the perspective of analyzing the social, the medium term we have identified is the idea of *social construct*. This works as essence, once it is instituted through the process of social negotiation of reality. For the subjects of social action, it has a constrictive nature, identical to the one of metastories, which legitimates social reality.

We argue, therefore, for the existence in the discourse of two different ontological levels, as two distinct ethical guidelines, which we have identified as relating, on the one hand, to the incorporation of social work’s constitutive values, in terms of its foundation, and on the other hand, as represented by its operational value—the implementation of the practice. We consider moral values as the outcomes of collective bargaining in relation to interpretations of what is truly valuable. Principles reflect the manner in which an interpretive community chooses to translate their dominant ethical values into social practice, as a result of this interpretative pact.

The category of *ethical value* is a convention of language, accepted as having value in itself, while the *ethical principle* is a social construct, resulting in communicative action (Habermas, 1984), formed around those ethical values. Within any social practices, we will find constitutive and operational ethical values. The first set of values (constitutive) establishes the ethical foundation of social practice, while the second set (operational) governs the social process for implementing the former. Once accepted, the values and principles within an interpretive community become an imperative constructive value, similar in essence to essentialist ethics (Frunză, 2016).

The constitutive ethical values of social work—among which we have mentioned the development of the beneficiaries’ autonomy and the achievement of social justice through fair redistribution of values, ensuring equal opportunities for persons belonging to vulnerable, discriminated, and marginalized groups—are precisely the practical implementation of the ethical vision contained in various public policies (Frunză, 2016). In the context of the present research, the determined constitutive values were *dignity, responsibility towards others, charity, and justice*. We understand *constitutive values* as the values that generate a certain social practice and justify its existence and necessity, constituting a metareference for that practice—a “foundation” in terms of social ontology.

Operational values are those values that are actually involved in the practice and that punctuate the ethics of an effective welfare practice. At a discursive level, we have identified a number of ethical values, which are as follows: autonomy, responsibility, fairness, kindness, and vocation.

Autonomy is understood in terms of the beneficiary’s relational autonomy, which is seen as an objective of social practice. We have identified relational autonomy as the only form supported by professionals; other manifestations of autonomy, although existing in the discourse at the metatext level, are not explicitly recognized by the interviewees. We recognize an instrumental character of autonomy; the professionals advocating

for the need to build relational autonomy are answering their own professional development needs. Once this autonomy is achieved, it can act as the networking facilitator between professionals, legal frameworks, and institutions.

Following the axial coding, we have built the category *Welfare as a manifestation of relational autonomy*, from keywords that define the relationship “independent/dependent beneficiary—welfare system,” which we interpret in terms of “autonomy—heteronomy.” This category is oriented towards autonomy as an operational value.

Values-based welfare practice also requires both professional construction and operation, on the basis of principles that comply with the ethical values of its constituent, as the ethical foundation of social practice. The social implementation of these constitutive values is characterized by the professional’s action, which operationalizes them.

In terms of individuals’ autonomy, according to the interviewees’ discourse, practice should be oriented towards the affirmation of the *principle of respect for persons*. The conversion of these principles is effected through strategies of empowerment and facilitating social change, and of the construction of development frameworks of relational autonomy, in order for the beneficiaries of social services to develop self-advocacy skills, for use in any potential future crises they might face.

Wealth is the manifestation of a client’s autonomy, from the professional’s perspective, and is also associated with the desirable results of their intervention, in terms of a *balance* of the individual’s well-being in relation to their social context. We consider the professional perspective that sees welfare as a manifestation of individual autonomy as referring to their own professional considerations. Achieving a client’s autonomy in relation to the welfare system is the desired result for the professional, who would sooner meet the professional and institutional parameters for intervention success, than respect the individual’s moral agency and capability of self-determination. In the construction of a beneficiary’s welfare, we identified, within the discourse level, the *responsibility* for the welfare of

the client as a category defined by the principle of *responsibility* and respect for dignity. We identified the professionals’ discussion of the beneficiaries in terms of a Levinasian responsibility towards the other, as the manifestation of care to the beneficiary, but also in terms of their professional duty towards the institution.

The *professional autonomy of the social worker* can be analogous with *professional vocation*, while overshadowed by the conflict between the regulated welfare system and professional, whose development is thereby “constrained.” A conflict arises between the personal morals of the social worker—based on vocation and the feeling of duty, as translated into professional practice—and the ethics of institutional responsibility, supported by public policies—based on principles of justice and solidarity, which are perceived as competing principles.

As a result of generating a paradigmatic model of values-based social work practice, we have produced a table of analysis based on the operational values discernible in the discourse of respondents and in the professional practices they mention. Further induction can relate these with the ethical principles governing those practices, ultimately leading to the statement of a set of corresponding constitutive values.

We do not claim that this model is comprehensive or that it lists all the constitutive and operational values governing social work; neither do we claim that there is a strict correspondence between the identified constitutive and operational values. The table below serves as a set of hypotheses generated inductively, which can form the basis of future research aimed at validating the operational model. The logic established by such a model is that the ethical values detected in the professional discourse are not necessarily present as such, but rather manifest in the form of practices and principles.

Operational and constitutive values together with principles are constituents of a values-based social work metamodel, or—in other words—a legitimate metastory of the social work profession, as it exists in the practitioners’ consciousness.

Table 2: Constituents of Values- based social work metamodel

Operational values	Practices	Principles of:	Constitutive values
Autonomy - of the beneficiary - of the professional	Advocacy, lobbying, counseling, training, empowerment, capacitating; The construction of independence	Respect for persons	Dignity
Responsibility - of the beneficiary towards his/her own status - of the professional towards beneficiary - of the professional towards the institution	Empowerment; Facilitating the behavioral and social change of the beneficiary; Establishing a balance concerning the beneficiary accountability	Beneficence; non-maleficence	Alterity (in terms of human essence)
Equity of services offered to beneficiary	Distribution of services	Distributive justice; justification	Justice
Solidarity	Minimum guaranteed income; Humanitarian action	Welfare	Charity
Professionalism	Professionalization; Internalization of professional ethical values	Duty towards the profession	Vocation

The alteration of the metamodel through legislative or institutional intervention determines the professional's ability to shape his/her ideal universe of practice, in contrast to the real situation, which he/she might consider unethical. Focusing on values "is legitimate for the social worker—and for the professional in general—when it allows a convergence or divergence of identity construction, depending on the situation, in relation to the perspective of the institutional and legal framework in which that social/communicative practice has been developed. In this context, we have proposed a theoretical model of the supervision of ethics, which may act to facilitate the internalizing of the ethical values" of the organization by professionals and the internalizing of practical values by the institutions. The supervision of ethics can help professionals to improve their performance in implementing ethics and motivating the development of an organizational environment centered on ethical value" (Caras & Sandu, 2014b, pp.75- 94).

The supervision of ethics model to which we refer was presented in the article "Epistemic and Pragmatic Backgrounds of Supervision of Ethics" (Caras & Sandu, 2014a, pp. 142–151). The authors considered the supervision of ethics able to achieve at least the following functions: building ethics in organizations; ethical compliance monitoring; ethical counseling, support and advice; administrative and deliberative functions; mediation in order to achieve a reflective balance of the interests of each party within the organization; and the gatekeeping of ethical policies.

The level of convergence between decisions concerning practical activities and decisions concerning guiding values can be checked by the supervisor of ethics in terms of the epistemic and axiological compatibility between them. As a result of the need to obtain the abovementioned convergence, the necessity of a gatekeeping function for ethical policies arises (Caras & Sandu, 2014a). This allows for the definition of the interpretative frameworks necessary to establish an agreement of use by the organizational values, the supervisor of ethics supervisor therefore has a role in the construction of public policies and

their implementation. By exercising a gatekeeping function, a relationship between constitutive and operational ethical values is ensured, in order for a transition to be made from these values to practical ethical principles.

Once the adherence of professionals to organizational culture has been guaranteed, it then intervenes in the monitoring of ethical compliance, when the compatibility of procedural methodology's ethical standards is implicated. However, it also intervenes in the monitoring of their compliance by practitioners operating in areas with explicit an ethical impact and improves the ethical practices of professionals by implementing ethical audits of the organizational culture's ethics and its ethics policies (Reamer, 2000, pp. 355-366; Caras, 2014).

The role of ethical gatekeeping comes in when, in discussing public policy, the supervisor points to the ethical characteristics of each option. This gatekeeping function is becoming instrumental, to the extent that supervisors are participating in ethical decisions themselves, by facilitating the deliberation on ethical values "and transposing instruments from the organization's public policy into the actual practices" (Caras, 2014).

From a pragmatic perspective, the functions of ethical supervision complement those of classical ethical expertise, from which it partially takes over the role of ethical gatekeeping and the facilitation of obtaining an interpretative agreement between the organization, the professional and the beneficiary (or user).

Conclusions

We support the need for an awareness of ethical expertise to be developed in the field of social services, which is a key area for ethical action, in that it transfers public policies into social action on behalf of the beneficiary and, as such, requires the validation of an ethical consensus and ethical gatekeeping practice.

The supervision of ethics, in our view, is constructed as analogous to social supervision, as defined by Kadushin (1992), in terms of providing professional support to supervisees and facing tasks with a strong ethical weight. This support may be

theoretical, methodological, or practical, a process analogous and complementary to counseling of ethics. This analogy refers to the provision of formation and training in ethics and the realization of ethical audits, at both an institutional level and at the level of individual practice.

The key objective of this paper was to identify the possibility of constructing a grid of the prevailing ethical values in social work and their hierarchy as constitutive and operational values, starting from the discourse of specialists interviewed about their actual practice. This has allowed us to highlight a number of mechanisms by which ethical values influence social practices, as an interpretative derivation that ethical values bear when they are transposed into social practices. A good example, highlighted during the research, is the value of autonomy, which is understood as relational autonomy, partially losing the ethical dimension of moral agency.

Note: In order to decrease the number of words/pages of the article we chose not to insert all the fragments extracted from the respondents' discourse, but in some cases only the keywords and their interpretation. We presented the extracted fragments directly in English translation.

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