

HELPING RELATIONSHIP IN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND THE RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

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Abstract: Helping relationship in social assistance can be understood as a relationship between a professional who provides support in a given situation and a beneficiary who faces certain difficult situations. It is an interpersonal process, partly determined by regulations of the profession, but partly determined by specific subjective and socio-cultural characteristics. Helping relationship in social assistance assumes that the concept of change is an important engine in intervention and in the social worker - beneficiary relationship implicitly. In order for a relationship of support to exist, it must be permanently constructed by the two parties involved, which can be achieved in three phases: the beginning phase, the working phase and the final phase. During his professional approach, the social worker follows the ethical values, norms and principles. In the field of social assistance, great importance is given to the human being by the specific values and principles, but at the same time the urge towards respect and tolerance is observed between people and social groups. Anti-discrimination, social equity and acceptance regardless of gender, color, age, nationality, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc. are promoted. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of respecting human dignity in all professional endeavors in social assistance, starting from the formation of the social worker - beneficiary relationship, continuing with analyzing the needs of the beneficiary and ending with the provision of services for a better quality of life.

Keywords: helping relationship, human dignity, social worker, principles, values

Introduction

Helping relationship in social assistance can be understood as a relationship between a professional who provides support in a given situation

and a beneficiary who faces certain difficult situations. It is an interpersonal process, partly determined by regulations of the profession, but partly determined by specific, subjective and socio-cultural characteristics. These characteristics are connected on the one hand to the personalities of the people involved in the social worker – beneficiary relationship, and on the other hand, to the social requirements specific to the place and the moment in which the interaction occurs. In the helping relationship, the beneficiary aims “to obtain the services and material means that meet his needs, but first of all, he aims to be recognized as a person and not only as a conglomerate of problems, or worse, as deadweight to the society and in need of public mercy” (Roth, Rebeleanu, Poledna, p.33, <https://www.academia.edu/6772303>). In such a relationship, the social worker must be receptive to the beneficiary’s feelings with regard to the problem that he / she experiences, to respect the beneficiary, to treat him / her as a person whose needs belong to a given socio-emotional and behavioral context. The beneficiary must reach a certain level of confidence in the social worker’s ability to fully understand his problem and to provide proper support.

All interventions that occur in the social assistance relationship should lead to the increase in dignity, individuality and self-determination capacity of the beneficiaries. “Social assistance is a form of redistribution of goods, solidarity and social equity. At the same time, through its purpose of restoring the beneficial mutual relationships between the disadvantaged people and society, it actually strengthens the existing social system, maintaining inequalities. Both sides are permanently present in social assistance, but - in different activities involved - the side of remedying inequalities and that of maintaining the rule of law acquire different weights.” (Ibidem, p.33)

Helping relationship in social assistance

Social assistance activities and theoretical steps are related to the individual and the society. All human actions are carried out according to certain social models, “socially synthesized and sanctioned”, and helping vulnerable individuals and groups “is also subject to the same community norms, the same contextual conditioning aimed to identify the beneficiary, the approach and ways of intervention” (Bocancea apud Neamțu, 2003, p.112). An increasing concern of communities regarding social problems of the individuals has been observed over time, which resulted

in social assistance gaining its well-deserved status, through new social management approaches, materialized in the construction of the national systems of social assistance.

This field has been based on the well-known concept of *change*, “which guides the pattern of intervention and draws our attention to what is normal and customary in the daily life of each social actor” (Idem, p. 116). Thus, there are numerous internal and external factors that direct individuals towards change. The individuals act in the direction of change when they aim for a certain thing or situation, when they are afraid of losing something important to which they are affectively connected, such as human relationships or certain social situations or when they face unusual situations that can lead to significant risks. By considering these factors, social assistance allows for a helping relationship to be built so that its completion is beneficial to the targeted individual. Helping relationship is considered by certain authors (Pepinsky and Pepinsky) a hypothetical construction necessary to designate the implicit character of the observable interaction between two individuals. Other authors (Sheizer and Store) define it as the beginning of the interaction with another person / client that contributes in an easy and positive way to improving his/her situation. C. Rogers defines it as a relationship in which at least one person intends to promote, grow, develop and improve their lives.

The concept of change is an important engine in social assistance help relationship, in the context of intervention and in the social worker – beneficiary/client interaction; as a result “triggering the client’s motivation for change becomes an essential key for the social worker in his intervention; the level of anxiety felt in the faced situation and the degree of hope of achieving satisfactory change are essential and dynamic data in the intervention process”. (De Robertis, 1995, p.85) In order to induce change, two important elements are required: the first is the social worker who is considered an agent of change who can act in complex social contexts, and the second refers to the context issue (the individual who faces a difficult situation). Last but not least, it is important for the individual to be directly and permanently involved in the process of change, so that the outcome of the helping relationship is favorable. “The social worker is an agent of change that acts in complex social contexts, he is not limited to one type or another of assistance, but he devises combined and boundary-spanning, integral strategies” (Bulgaru, 2000, p.16).

For a helping relationship to be obtained, it must be permanently constructed by the two parties involved, i.e., the social worker and the beneficiary / client. Building a helping relationship is carried out in several phases:

1. *The starting phase* – during this phase the social worker clarifies the roles and the type of services he can provide. In order to effectively carry out this phase, the social worker must possess certain skills that help him direct the client towards the helping relationship: clarification of purpose - clear statements from the social worker that help define mutual expectations; encouraging feed-back - this skill offers the clients the opportunity to express different points of view as responses to the social worker's actions; stimulating trust in social action - refers to the action taken by the social worker to stimulate the client's confidence in the likely benefits of the helping strategy. "Here the most important skills are asking (open or closed) questions and active listening." (Goian, 2004, p.82)

2. *The working phase* - is much broader, comprising three substages, in which the social worker uses the following skills to establish the helping relationship:

– *In the first substage*, the number, frequency and content of the beneficiary's meetings with the social worker are established. It is important that, during this substage a permanent assessment of the meetings is carried out, even where an agreement has been reached on the number and content of the meetings, because a change in the client's situation may cancel some priorities. In this substage, contracts or agreements between the social worker and the client are concluded;

– *In the second substage*, the following aspects are pursued: carrying out verbal and non-verbal communication between the two parties and demonstrating the social worker's ability to identify and understand the client's feelings and states; wording by the social worker of what the beneficiary wants to express, but fails; open, unrestricted action by the social worker; objective evaluation of the support provided to the beneficiary, according to the perceived feelings, behavior and acceptance of the objectives; sharing personal thoughts and feelings, which strengthen the trust given by the beneficiary; identifying the beneficiary's strengths and expressing his confidence in the beneficiary's ability to overcome a difficult situation; customization of the client's concerns - the ability of the social worker to achieve breakdown of a problem that seems unsolvable, in several components easy to tackle and finally address;

guidance towards tangible targets - the attempt of the social worker to focus on the beneficiary's problem, with specific orientation towards a concern or solution. More concisely, the following skills are used here: "exploration and companionship; guidance towards change; observation; listening; asking questions; to focus, guide, concentrate; to guide the client to achieve the proposed objectives; to paraphrase; to summarize; to face; to be silent; background development" (Ibidem, p.83).

– *In the third substage*, the following skills are targeted: the ability of the social worker to help the client to express their dissatisfaction regarding the helping process; providing benchmarks that refer to facts, beliefs, values that the social worker holds; the social worker's effort to change the perception of others towards the beneficiary;

3. *The final phase* - is somewhat difficult for the beneficiary because it can be sometimes identified with separation or loss. In this phase, the beneficiary needs time to get used to the idea of ending. "The social worker needs the skills to prepare the client for this stage, to summarize, to know how to identify the clients who express their concerns only at this stage" (Ibidem). He uses the following skills: he highlights the ending by informing the beneficiary how much time is left until the end of the helping relationship; requests a sum up of things learned; stimulates the beneficiary to express his feelings related to the end of the helping relationship.

It is noted that throughout the formation and development of the helping relationship, the social worker must possess certain skills that facilitate effective communication. Thus, communication is an essential part of the interaction between the social worker and the beneficiary, "an interaction that includes all the physical and psychological processes that accompany the communication activity" (Șcheau, Levițchi, 2007, p.10). For a social worker, communication is the basic professional act, since any intervention begins with establishing a communication relationship. We insist on this issue, by describing interpersonal communication on which the helping relationship is based, as the form of effective communication with the strongest impact for change. Good communication in helping relationships implies both the ability to listen and the ability to lead a discussion by the social worker. Communication in the helping relationship depends on several factors such as: the personality of the beneficiary, his previous experience, relationships with others, education, intellectual level and health status.

Values and principles in the helping relationship in social assistance

As a distinct field of activity, social assistance is defined as “a set of institutions, programs, measures, professional activities, specialized services for the protection of persons, groups and communities with special problems, temporarily in difficulty, who are not able to achieve a normal, decent way of life by their own means and efforts” (Zamfir, C. ; Zamfir, E. 1995, p. 100). According to the definition agreed by NASW (National Association of Social Workers), the fundamental purpose of the profession of a social worker is restoring the capacity for normal social functioning of individuals, groups and communities; in this regard, it is important to create the social conditions necessary for the “normal” functioning of the individual in accordance with the standards of a given society.

The practice of social assistance consists in learning and applying specific values and principles. “Values refer to states or modes of action considered to be desirable. They play an essential role in guiding human actions, in setting aims and objectives, strategies, methods, paths of action (...). Regarding social assistance, its values express ideas reflecting attitudes towards people, beliefs concerning the purpose and role of human beings in society, their needs and goals, ways of action towards solving cases and obtaining the necessary goods for a decent living” (Bulgaru, 2012, p. 139). Specific methods are used which are in line with the promoted values and principles, and which are aimed at achieving goals such as:” supporting people in obtaining resources and services; psychological counseling and support for the individual and micro-groups; implementation or improvement of health services at community level; participation in the development and promotion of social legislation” (Barker, 1988, p.154 apud. Bocancea and Neamtu).

According to the Law no. 466/2004 (on the status of the social worker), the social worker “follows the ethical values and principles regarding the provision of quality services, social justice, the dignity and uniqueness of the person, the autonomy of the person, the development of human relationships and the permanent professional development, in view of increasing the quality of social intervention” (art. 4). Ethical norms are based on these values and principles; as a result they represent the ensemble of the proper moral conduct requirements in the activity of the social worker. Each social worker should acquire these ethical values

and norms and integrate them in his behavior, in order not to prejudice the image of the profession through his / her actions:

1. *Provision of services for the benefit of the assisted persons.* The main purpose of the social worker activity is to assist the people in difficulty by getting involved in identifying, understanding, correctly assessing and solving social problems. All his endeavors should follow the best interest of the beneficiary. If the assisted person's interest is a threat to the community / community members, the social worker has the responsibility to guide the assisted person and to mediate in order to harmonize the interests of the parties involved. "The main purpose of the social worker activity is to assist the people or communities in need, getting involved in identifying, understanding, correctly assessing and solving social problems" (Law 466/2004, art.17)

2. *Social justice.* Social workers promote the principles of social justice by ensuring equal opportunities regarding the access of assisted persons to information, services, resources and their participation in the decision-making process. They challenge and address different forms of social injustice such as: poverty, unemployment, discrimination, exclusion and other such forms. "(1) Social workers promote the principles of social justice, provided for in the normative acts regarding social assistance and social services. (2) Social workers ensure equal opportunities regarding the access of the assisted persons to information, services, resources and their participation in the decision-making process" (Ibidem, art.18, para.1,2).

3. *Dignity and uniqueness of the person.* "(1) Social workers respect and promote the dignity of the individual, the uniqueness and value of each person. (2) The social worker must not practice, tolerate, facilitate or collaborate in any form with discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation, age, political or religious beliefs, marital status, physical or mental impairment, material situation and / or any other preference, characteristic, condition or status" (Ibidem, art. 21, para.1,2).

4. *Self-determination.* The social worker respects and promotes the right of the assisted persons to self-determination. "The social worker supports the assisted persons in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals, in order to choose the best option" (Ibidem, art. 22). They may limit the right to self-determination of the assisted persons when, according to the professional judgment of the social worker, the present and / or future actions of the assisted persons present a risk to themselves and / or the others.

5. *Human relationships*. Social workers recognize the fundamental importance of human relationships and promote them in professional practice. They encourage, strengthen interhuman relationships and “contribute to strengthening relationships between people in order to promote, restore, maintain and / or improve the quality of life of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities” (Ibidem, art. 23).

6. *Integrity*. “Social workers act with honesty and responsibility towards the beneficiaries, institutions and society, in accordance with the deontological norms of the profession, adopted by the professional community through the College” (Ibidem, art. 24).

7. *Competence*. Social workers must carry out their activity only in the area of professional competence determined by their qualification and professional experience. They have the obligation to permanently improve their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice, while contributing to the improvement and development of the knowledge base of the profession.

By taking into account these values and principles, we can emphasize certain characteristics of the helping relationship: confidentiality (all the information that the beneficiary offers is confidential, kept by the social worker as secret information); growth and change (dynamic relationship that changes as the interaction with the beneficiary and its involvement in the assistance process change); support (a support system is provided to the beneficiary to ensure the stability necessary for the beneficiary to assume his own problems and change his behavior); honesty (direct and honest communication, so that the relationship established between the beneficiary and the social worker is characterized by trust and acceptance).

Respect for human dignity in social assistance. Deontological aspects

We cannot refer to social assistance without mentioning the importance of respecting human dignity. Human dignity¹ is a measure of appreciation between people, which comes from within, but also from other people. A human being is equal to another human being and both have the same dignity. “Dignity may refer to another person and his self,

1 Rotaru Ioan-Gheorghe, ‘Plea for Human Dignity’, in *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, 2016, Volume 1, pp. 29-43.

meaning I am worthy to be human, and it also refers to other people. Here dignity is free.”²

Dignity can be attributed to human beings and the people. It can be regarded on the one hand as belonging to humans in general, and on the other hand as belonging to the specialists. If we refer to the specialists in the field of social assistance, we may see the importance given to the human being through the very values and principles specified, but at the same time, we may observe the urge for respect and tolerance between people and social groups. Anti-discrimination, social equity and acceptance regardless of gender, color, age, nationality, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc. are promoted.

Furthermore, dignity can also be viewed from the perspective of universal human rights, social equity, social processes, etc., but not least, from the perspective of fulfillment of needs in order to maintain life and its quality at an optimal level. According to Maslow's Pyramid, human beings have a series of needs which, in the absence of their (at least partial) fulfillment, may affect dignity. Necessity can be defined as “as a sense of lacking or even feeling “bad”, which urges people to act in order to satisfy the need”.³

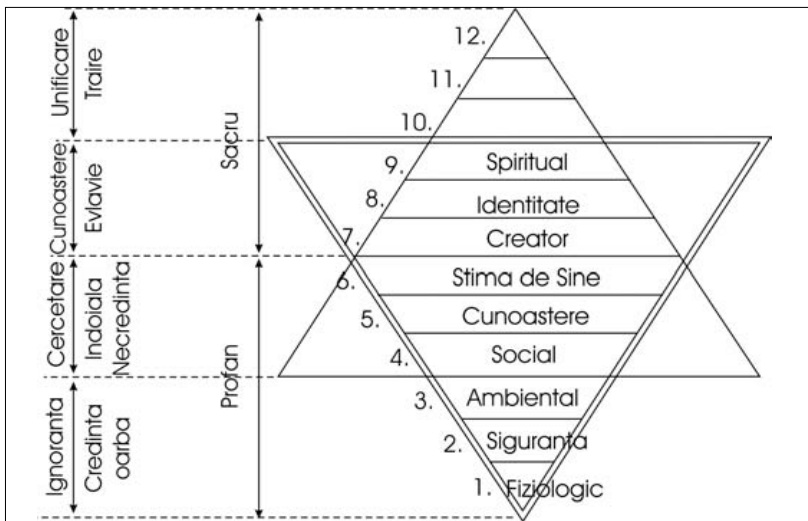


Figure. no. 1 Hierarchy of needs - Maslow's pyramid. (Burcu, 2003, p.12)

2 Mereuță I.; Bujor, V.; Munteanu, L.; Saulea A., *Demnitatea oamenilor bătrâni și asistența lor medico-socială*, Asoc. “Pentru Demnitatea Umană”, Univ. de Stat de Medicină și Farmacie “Nicolae Testemițanu”, Asoc. “Pentru Demnitatea Umană”, Chișinău, 2004, p.6.

3 *Ibidem*, p.8.

Larousse wrote that “a satisfied need leads to a well-being state, because it restores in the body a series of temporarily suspended functions.” Thus, the important needs to be fulfilled are found in the following categories: 1) *physiological needs* - these needs are fundamental and they concern the biological aspects. They ensure the balance between people and environment. Failure to meet one of these needs can disrupt the balance and alter peoples’ health; 2) *safety needs* - they are also various: the need for economic security - financial security, i.e., the certainty to have sufficient financial resources for a decent life. Fulfillment or non-fulfillment of these needs is directly reflected on both emotional and physical stability: the need of physical security represents the need of the human being to feel safe in the environment in which he lives or which he transits; the need for psychological security includes the need not to be afraid of loneliness, disease, future and even death. Social needs refer to the fact that a human being cannot live alone, but needs human relationships, communication. 3) *The need for affection* - is manifested by the need to love and be loved; 4) *the need for autonomy* - refers to the need for freedom, the need to be able to decide for oneself, and is a fundamental human right; the need for autonomy also includes the need of feeling valued and recognized, appreciated by those around; 5) *the need for self-actualization* or the need to achieve one’s potential, to create, to be useful. The need for achievement is attributed to family activity, professional, cultural, political, religious activity, etc.

For a good management and fulfillment of the needs of the people in difficulty, social assistance comes to their support by establishing a beneficial helping relationship on the one hand, and on the other hand through the social assistance system that focuses on the social protection of the citizens, social welfare, prevention and intervention programs and projects, etc.

With particular reference to the helping relationship, social workers have certain responsibilities in the relationship with the beneficiary, mainly aimed at respecting human dignity:

- *Commitment to the assisted person.* The main responsibility of the social worker is to promote the welfare of the assisted person, working within the limits of the law and responsibilities towards his employing institution.

- *Respect for the principle of self-determination.* The social worker does not decide on behalf of the assisted person. The social worker helps the assisted person to identify and develop their resources in order to choose the best option, while also paying the necessary attention to the interests of the other parties involved. Exceptions are provided by law.
- *The contract with the assisted person.* The social worker provides services to the assisted persons only in the context of a professional relationship, based - when appropriate - on a written contract and/ or the consent of the assisted person.
- *Professional competency.* All actions of the social worker must be within the lines of his profession. The professional training of the social worker must be a continuous process of improvement.
- *Cultural competence and social diversity.* The social worker offers services in accordance with the cultural particularities of the assisted person, by adapting to the cultural diversity through the knowledge, understanding, acceptance and enhancement of the existing cultural models.
- *Conflict of interests.* The social worker avoids conflict of interests in performing his duties and promotes an impartial approach of professional situations.
- *Confidentiality and privacy.* “In his professional activity, the social worker follows the principles of respecting and defending the privacy of the beneficiary, the principle of confidentiality, as well as the responsible use of the information obtained while fulfilling his professional duties” (Code of Ethics, Art.26, paragraph 1)
- *Access to files.* Access to the files of the assisted persons and their transfer is performed in such a way as to ensure the protection of confidential information. “Access to the documents of the beneficiaries is allowed to professionals working in multidisciplinary teams, to professional activity supervisors in social assistance, as well as to other people authorized under the specifications of the law (Ibidem, Art.28, paragraph 2)
- *Physical contact.* Physical contact with the assisted person is avoided by the social worker, if this psychologically affects the assisted person. The social worker who engages in physical contacts with the assisted persons has the responsibility to set limits appropriate to the cultural differences

- *Language.* The social worker uses an adequate and respectful language towards the assisted person and avoids the use of words that may harm individuals, groups or communities.
- *Interruption and ending of the relationship with the assisted person.* The social worker ends the professional relationship with the assisted person and the services offered to him / her when he no longer meets the needs and interests of the assisted person. The social worker ensures that the conclusion of the professional relationship with the assisted person and the service provided is a planned process on which the assisted person has all the necessary information.

In conclusion, respect for human dignity is the fundamental principle at the basis of building helping relationship in social assistance. From the first meeting between the social worker and the beneficiary in which benchmarks are established to build the helping relationship, and until the normal social functioning of the beneficiary is restored, basic principles in social assistance are fulfilled, such as: the provision of services for the benefit of the assisted persons, promotion of social justice, self-determination, respect for human relations, integrity, competence. All these can be fully met when the needs of the beneficiary are properly analyzed and evaluated and a support plan is established to meet the identified needs. Throughout this process, the social worker has certain responsibilities and pursues important steps, so that the beneficiary is satisfied from the point of view of provisioning of services, but also from the point of view of mutual respect in the helping relationship.

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