

SOCIAL WORK IN THE RURAL AREA FROM DOLJ COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract

After 40 years of communism and after other 25 years without communism, the social work in Romania tries yet to take back its place. A foray into the history of the modern social work in Romania illustrates the rupture brought by the intrusion of the political regime in the evolution of the social work profession and the difficulty of the rebuilding its identity in this country. The rural area is the most affected by this situation, so the article includes the results of an evaluation aiming the communication skills of the people who have responsibilities as social worker according to the job description, but they are not qualified social workers. This research was conducted in 2013 in about a third of the rural localities from Dolj County. The analysis of the relevant legislation, of the statistical information on the present situation of the qualified social workers in the rural areas and the interpretation of the findings of this research led us to the conclusions that suggest the need for major improvement of the state of facts.

Keywords: Social work, rural area, unqualified social workers, skills

Introduction

Romania, like other Eastern European countries had a communist regime. During this period, which lasted 40 years, many things have changed dramatically development, including social work system. The interwar progress that it placed in on an ascendant path were annihilated and it shall started from scratch. Thus, after 25 years from the regime change, the central place that should have the social worker in this system is not recognized. Unqualified persons, that haven't the necessary skills, occupy many social workers' jobs, especially in rural area, where are meeting the most acute social problems and severe poverty. This situation is analyzed for the Dolj county, Romania.

An evaluation of the communication skills of these persons with responsibilities in social work employed in rural public administration was made in a particular context. The direct observation of 34 people divided in

two groups, and the comparison between the two lots of subjects, one observed before and other observed after a communication skills training, revealed that practical experience not replaces the initial social work education.

In the context of the social problems from rural area, the need of qualified and very well prepared social worker is more actual than ever.

A short social work history in Romania

Making a brief foray into the history of social work it is seen that in Romania this area was developed in the same rhythm as in Western European countries. In first Christian centuries was meeting mutual aid and charity / philanthropy, in Medieval era appeared social welfare institutions were founded by the wealthy, including the prince, the head of the country, for help orphans, poor people, disabled, elderly or sick people, especially near the Monasteries. Many monasteries founded special places for those vulnerable groups. By example in 1704 was at work the first hospital, “Colțea”, with 24 beds. In 1775 is founded “The Box of the Charity (Mercy)”, an arrangement similar with the fee for poverty from England, 1601.

The first law about the protection of the children is enacted in 1780, and in 1831 is promulgated the first law about the social work institutions. From this moment, the state assumes responsibility in the protection of the disadvantaged people. In the year 1881 is mentioned the first social services belonging to the Bucharest City Hall. The second half of the 19th century is distinguished by many attempts to make laws and social services for blind people, many achievements in the social work of the children.

The first social insurance appeared in German in 1883 (sickness insurance), 1984 (accident insurance) and 1989 (old and disability insurance), followed by England in 1911 and Romania in 1912, when appear the first laws of the social insurance for accidents, invalidities, and old age.

The interwar period was the most flourishing in the evolution of the social work in Romania. In ‘20 are putting the foundations of the specialized social services system. In 1929 is founded the first high school of social work by university level, named “Princess Helen”, in the same year began publication of the “The Social Work Review” (until 1944).

In 1936 is done the first Census of the social work units. A number of 521 units were identified, of which 50 were public institutions and 471 were private. These units had few assistants, the most of which being capable to assist fewer than ten persons. The year 1938 is marked by the first Congress of Social Workers in Bucharest, organized by the Romanian sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, the most prominent figure in evolution of the social work profession. He conceived a social work system based on a scientific social

work founded on his and his colleagues social research. The network of the social work institution was developing, offering social services to a very large category of population, especially in the urban area, including the delinquents, homeless, and with great emphasis on the family.

After the second War, in Romania was a complex social work system, with a social worker to 30000 people and as academic achievement of the profession we notice the appearance in 1962 of the first schoolbook of social work methods, authors Ioan Matei and Henri Stahl (the ex-students of Dimitrie Gusti). Unfortunately, at that moment the social work was already eliminated from the university since 1952, becoming undergraduate level. In 1969 are eliminated all social work schools and the profession of social worker was removed from the classification of occupations.

The nonprofit sector, that was very developed, as it can be observed from the statistic of the social services providers, is almost totally destroyed. There remain only two NGOs: one for the deaf, and one for the blind.

This was the result of the ideology that premises that the socialist society is perfect: no poverty, no social problems. The need of social work does not exist, because the problems can be resolved by politic and bureaucratic and administrative measures. In this connection, the disabled people, the elderly and the abandoned children are put in institution by very big capacity: hundred of beneficiaries, and isolated from society. The number of children in institutions was very big: approximately 100,000 children were in institutions in 1990, as estimated. As positive points of that period we notice the very large universal benefits: medical assistance, benefits for children and for the families with many than three children, free of charge education at all levels and very high level of work occupation of the people.

After the fall of the communism, after the revolution of December 1989, higher social work education was re-established and with small steps was set up a modern system of social work, with a legislative frame based on international and European recommendations, with governmental institution organized at national, county and local level.

Every modern social work system is characterized by three essential elements: human capital, formed by the social workers and other professional staff, beneficiaries, including assisted people from different vulnerable groups being in situations of risk, socially disadvantaged, and the social context formed by the legislative frame, the institutional network, the social support measures like social services and benefits. (Buzducea, 2009) Despite the progress recording in the domain, especially in what means the social context, this system has many difficulties, the main important in our opinion being the lack of qualified social workers at all its levels. In other words, the human capital of the social work system is deficient.

In 2004 was enacted the law about the statute of social worker, and according with this law was establish one year later the National Collegium of Social Workers (NCSW or CNAS, in Romanian language) and was approved The Ethical Code of Social Worker. According to the law, a person can be social worker in Romania if he has social work qualification at university level and he is member of NCSW, having the notice to exercise the profession.

Between 1990 and 2004, unqualified persons occupied many social workers' jobs. This law, 466 from 2004, obliged all those people to complete their social work education and became real social workers. But this thing did not happened. This people occupy yet that work place from specialized social services and public administration.

Dolj county and rural social work in Romania

The practice of social work in the rural area setting is different from the practice in urban setting. 45% of Romanian population lives there. According with Pugh and Cheers, five are the criteria for analyzing the differences between rural and urban area: geography, demography, economy, political and structural dimensions and community. (Pugh and Cheers, 2010, p. 3) All of these criteria affect the social work too and shape it a specifically character.

The people of the villages has their own lifestyle, modeled by the geographical landscape, the main occupations, like agriculture – plants cultivation and animal breeding. The natural resources are important and the transportations infrastructures are poor. The access by information is more difficult for village people because the costs, not for the geographical conditions, Dolj having fields and hills as main land shapes.

With a surface by 7414 squarekilometers and a population of 688,885 inhabitants by 1st January 2014, Dolj is a Southwestern county, the 8th from the 41 counties of Romania, by the criteria of population. Since 1990, the county population was diminished with 11 percents, in comparison with the decrease of the entire country population that was 8%. The percent of rural population represent 46%, a lower percent than in 1990, when was 52.7. Only 26% from the population of active age live in rural area. The number of the children is very reduced and the population is more aged than in urban area. The ruralization and feminization of aging are very know phenomenon in Romania. The external migration was more significant in rural area. The youth go to the cities or in other countries to find a job. These demographical aspects are characteristic to all rural localities.

The rural economy is based on agriculture and offers fewer opportunities for decent wins. The living cost is expensive, the paid work is very rare, the unemployment has high rates and many people are dependent

by welfare benefits, like social aid and family allowance. Dolj occupies the first place as number as beneficiaries of social aid (14,310 in September 2014, according the statistic of Ministry of Labor), and on one of the first places as percents of beneficiaries form the total population.

If we discuss about the political aspects, we must underline that the funding for public services are based on taxes collected from the community, that may have a very small number of inhabitants, without considering the needs of specific social services. The result is a very few social services in the area when is the great need of them. On the other hand, as shown by International Federation on social workers, “many rural communities are left out of the mainstream of national development. The main policy issue for social workers therefore, is to ensure that those who are directly affected by change are involved in the decision-making process.” And this is an important skills required to the social worker.

The social problems from rural area are deep: poverty and extreme poverty, Roma minority, domestic violence, child abuse, the exploitation of the child labor, culture of the powerless and dependency of social benefits, absence of infrastructure and public transportation, higher rates of the unemployment, fewer opportunities to win enough money for a decent life, higher vulnerability to human trafficking, higher rates of alcohol use, school abandonment, lack of social and medical services. By the chronic social problems are added other linked by the incapacities to meet the needs, like the inadequate access to social and medical services.

This is the landscape in which the social worker acts. In a village, everyone knows everyone, and they are involve together sometimes in any works in agriculture (by example the harvest). This facts shape a unique appearance of the problems faced by the rural population and their needs for social work interventions. A social worker form a rural area is often more isolated from other social workers (Lohmann and Lohmann, 2008, p. 12). He needs to,,know how to weave together formal and informal resources to meet needs and support people” (Lohmann and Lohmann, 2008, p. 14). Often is underlined the great importance of the implication of the social worker in community development.

According to the principle of decentralization of decision making that was discuss in the earlier 1980 (Ritala-Koskinen and H. Valokivi, 2006, p.3), in Romania the municipalities are responsible for organizing and developing social services at the local level like fitting the demands of laws and national standards to the local practices. The municipalities must have also an active role in identifying social problems and finding innovative solutions. It sounds good, but the local public administration is not prepared, has neither the financial, neither the human resources to respond by those problems.

A report of a very large research classified Dolj County on the least place regarding the numbers of the staff from social services who had specialized education. (Ministerul Muncii, 2011, p. 236). Dolj has 111 localities, with one big city (Craiova, 306,000 inhabitants), 6 small towns and 104 rural localities. Only Craiova and other three rural localities have qualified social worker employed by municipalities, as results from the records of the NCSW.

Subordinated to county council, The General Direction of Social Work and Child Protection (GDSWCP or DGASPC, in Romanian language) is the main provider of social services from county, and the only public provider who has qualified social workers, but neither those aren't enough. The first net in taking new social cases are usual the social work direction from city halls. Sometimes, especially the child abuses are referred directly GDSWCP, particularly if those people live in the capital of the county, Craiova, where is the headquarters of this institution.

The social workers from city halls shall make an initial assessment of the social case before referral to the specialized social services from GDSWCP. Same informal discussions with social workers from GDSWCP shows that the persons with responsibilities in social work from city hall from rural area frequently copying old reports forgetting to change the data about their beneficiaries: the children have the same age from one year to another, people with disabilities have the same living conditions and the same deficiency etc. the lack of specialized professional training is the main cause.

Methods and sample

In June 2013, an international NGO, who implements programs in the child protection domain in Romania, has organized a training for 30 persons, employed in 30 city halls, having social work responsibilities, according to the job description, but not being qualified social workers. Wanting to know the level of the knowledge, the attitudes and the skills of the participants after this training, the staff asked me to evaluate only their communication skills, but no initial assessment was made.

The utilized method was the direct observation, and the instrument was an observation sheet. My responsibility was to apply this instrument and summarize the evaluation results in a report. As observer, I went to the home of one assisted person in June 2013 with each of the 17 evaluated persons with responsibilities in social work from 17 rural municipalities. The persons were selected after the criteria of availability in the mentioned period.

In November 2013, the NGO staff intentioned to start one other training with a new group from other 30 rural localities. They asked me to make the same evaluation, by this time the aim being both the assessment of

the subjects before the training and the comparison with first sample. The question was if this continuing social work courses are efficient for those persons or not. The selection criterion was in this case the receptivity of the majors by the offer of the NGO to train the persons with social work responsibilities for free, manifested through the positive response to the phone call.

The same method and instrument were utilized, in the same way, having other 17 subjects of research, working with legal agreement in a rural city hall, and having social work responsibilities, but without a social work qualification. Currently they are named “persons with social work responsibilities”.

The observation sheets were completed respecting the anonymity of the observed people, and numbered randomly at the end of data collection, because the research objective was evaluating the effectiveness of training on the profession and not the individual assessment of participants. Each of the observed ones went to the home of a beneficiary to perform an assessment or monitoring visit of a client, and conversations with beneficiaries were conducted in the presence of the observer. In one case the meeting taking place at the town hall.

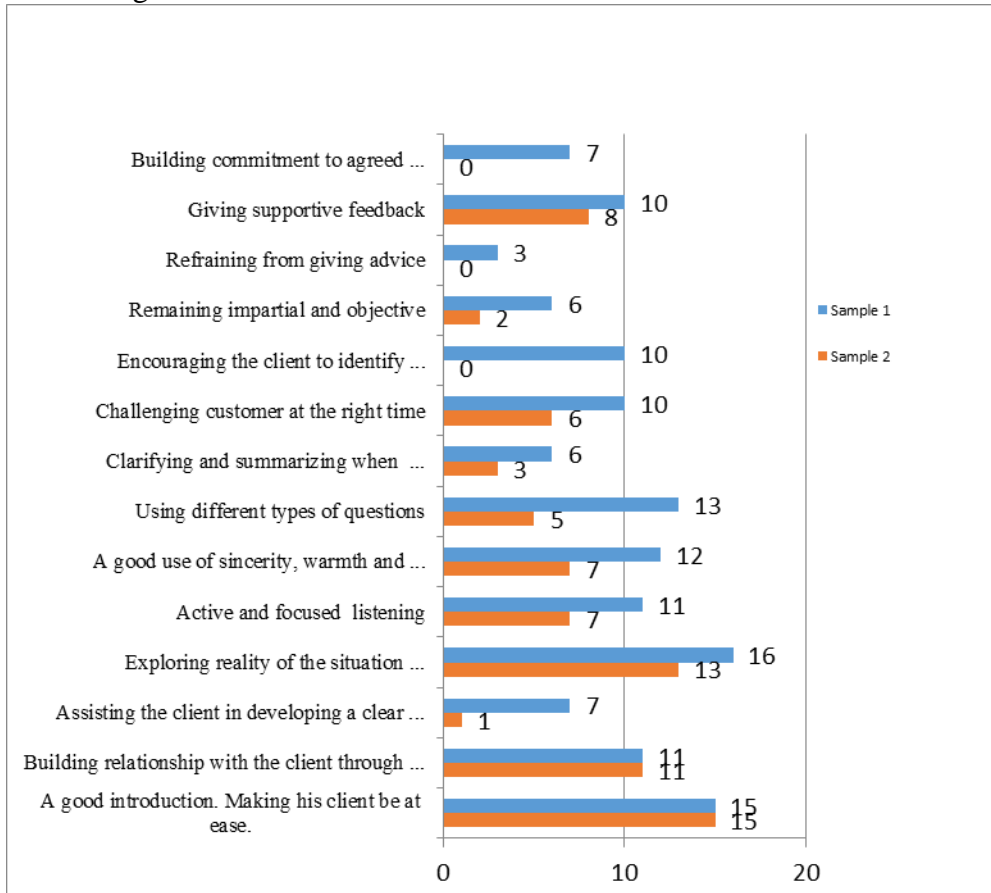
The observed items are in the next table. For every item must be recorded examples that shows the fulfillment of the criteria, as what done or said the observed persons.

Evaluated items through observing practice
A good introduction. Making his client to be easy.
Building relationship with the client connection and understanding
Assisting the client in developing a clear plan of action
Exploring reality of the situation faced by customer
Active and focused / concentrated listening
A good use of sincerity, warmth and empathy
Using different types of questions
Clarifying and summarizing when connecting and understanding
Challenging customer at the right time
Encouraging the client to identify the alternative options
Remaining impartial and objective
Refraining from giving advice
Giving supportive feedback
Building commitment to agreed actions

The results

Fig. 1 illustrates the relative frequencies of the responses to each question in the two groups. It is obvious that the frequencies are higher in most items in the first sample, consists of people who participated by the training. Only two items have the same frequency in both groups: 15 of the

participants in the research were able to do a good introduction: they greeted, introduced himself, introduced the observer, they summarized the purpose of the visit and the role of the observer (to a lesser measure) and 11 of them showed signs that connects to the interlocutor.



This result is not surprising, because people with social work responsibilities work in small communities where everyone knows everyone. Moreover, those beneficiaries of social aids interact at least 4 times on every year with this person. Unfortunately, in November group, in addition to these two skills, has been identified very often only the ability to explore the reality of the situation with the client (n = 13). I considered that the person has the skill to explore the reality of the client's situation if it is capable to address him aimed questions, about his problems, concerns and needs and manages to give an answer to at least one invitation from the client. I haven't found persons that were capable of exploring into the deep, after a plan established before, the situation of the client.

For the June sample, by one-half ($n = 8$) of the subjects had been check from 9 to 14 items, and the other half ($n = 9$) between 0 and 7 items. Two people showed all the 14 behaviors pursued (one of them being qualified social worker) and at one of the subjects I couldn't check any of the items previously established in the observation sheet. This one went to the home of a beneficiary because he has received an address sent by the General Direction of Social Work and Child Protection from another county, aiming the reintegration of two children being at that moment in the care of that specialized public service, the father of minors being imprisoned, and his mother lived in that village from Dolj. The visit went like this: after greeting them, our subject told her directly that the institution from county X asks again if she wants back her children, and ended with the question-conclusion: "You don't want them. Do you?".

I distinguished a weaker use of some communication skills like: asking different types of questions ($n=5$), focused and active listening ($n=7$), clarifying and summarizing ($n=3$), manifesting empathy ($n=7$), keeping impartiality, objectivity ($n=2$), refraining from giving advice ($n=0$). I rarely found subjects capable of challenge the client at the right moment. ($n=6$)

If in the sample I observed in June I found them rarely, in the new lot the next abilities are missing: assisting the client in developing a plan of action ($n=1$), encouraging the client in identifying some alternative options ($n=0$) and building the engagement in agreed actions ($n=0$).

By analyzing the obtained results, we observe that the difference between the mediums of the 2 lots is 1,59 (the November sample - 4,59 checked items per subject, the June sample - 6,17 checked items per subject), is big if we analyze it in relation with the level of the 2 obtained average. Given that they are already low (the total number of checked items was 14) I think that the period of time needed for all the subjects to develop typical skills of this profession remains significant.

As it was observed, the subjects are capable of making a good introduction and connecting to the beneficiary, fact that happens, I think, because they know each other, interact frequently and have cordial interpersonal relations, the level of the interpersonal communication skills is low, and the skills based on co-responsibility and co-participation of the beneficiary in the realization of intervention plans and assuming the gets near 0 in the second lot.

For some items identified as having low frequency in the first lot, too: Assisting the client in developing a clear plan of action ($n=7$), building engagement to the agreed actions ($n=7$), clarifying and summarizing when connecting and understanding ($n=6$), remaining impartial and objective ($n=6$), refraining from giving advice ($n=3$), in the second lot they were almost unseen (see figure 1)

I can conclude that the formation programs can ameliorate the situation, especially in the sphere of some communication skills like active listening, using sincerity, warmth and empathy and can make the subjects be aware of the importance of the co-participation and co-responsibility of the beneficiary (to build plans together, to consent to agreed actions, to encourage identifying alternative options). Yet I have a restraint based on the fact that the participants of the course know what we were expecting from them so that they were capable of selecting the cases to go to visit, so that they can allow them to prove some abilities. Complex cases were often chosen, families with many children, problem children, and maternal assistants. As a difference, the subjects in the November lot have chosen the cases which were the most accessible, a part of them being just beneficiary of social help (not understanding the request to make evaluation and monitoring visits, not knowing what will be observed or simply not usually making this kind of visits, and just making the social investigations for giving social benefits, some of them being made right in the office, not outside). In the subject's point of view, these cases only need social help; as a result they don't have the perspective of a more elaborated exploration of the situation or realizing a plan of action.

Most of the observed subjects recognized that in general they don't make monitoring visits because of the lack of time and because: " I am not a social worker, I don't really know what to ask them". In some of the city halls the social work responsibilities are distributed to more persons (maximum 4 persons), the city hall employees on different jobs receiving as supplementary tasks one or more of the responsibilities linked to family allowance, social aids, aids for heating their home during winter time, management of the task linked to disabled people and their personal assistants, mail with GDSWCP and monitoring the cases of foster care, reports of social assessment in case of divorce.

For some of the observed subjects is not clear what means monitoring the case. They don't have a plan or some indicators to observe, and this lack of structure of their discourse is saw be the clients. The worker hasn't a defined aim of his visit, or don't clarify with the client. By example he make a monitoring visit, has in his mind any aspects to observe, but he don't communicate them to the client, switches from one subject to another and gives the impression that he still searches for something, or he is coming only in a friendly visit or, on the contrary in an inspection.

The most parts of the subjects think that they are those who must resolve all of their client's problems and help them financially. Some of them act as a kind of teachers of their clients and treat them like some ignorant and disobedient children. They are disappointed and surprised that although "I told them to do," the clients did not.

The system of giving social benefits is heavy, based on many papers, and if some electronic data bases were managed properly they won't be needed. In my opinion, these kind of measures diminish the importance of the work in their own farm. The eligibility criteria are translated as *To receive you mustn't have*, not as it is correct: *Who doesn't have can receive*. On the other side, because of the social benefits being the only measure of social work given and the only one which the local authorities are obliged to give, the social worker tends to consider that he must give these benefits whenever he find a difficult situation, or that this is his role in the city hall, that this means social work.

Sometimes were made remarks such as: "In theory everything is nice, here things are different," "The classes are good, but not really help us", which may reflect the fact that subjects do not understand the role and importance of using techniques. Those people don't have that vital professional background and don't understand the role of the social worker in the community and in direct relationship with the customer.

I mark a positive point that particularly impressed me by the most of the subjects: their sincere interest for beneficiaries, their very close, familiar way to interact with them, and a good knowledge of community issues.

Limitations

The author made not the instrument of this research. The aim of the research was not to describe the rural social work in Dolj County, but a secondary analyzes releave aspects by his type. The items were selected by the trainer conform the curriculum of the course, and the skills followed to be formed by that training, the subjects of this being "Methods of communication and interviewing" and "Work with difficult families". They are not exhaustive, but include the most important communication skills for the social workers. The assessment, planning and social work intervention skills were not the subject of the research, so the image is not complete. Despite this, some items reached tangential this kind of skills and the made observations suggest that they belong in very low measures to the participants. "Exploring reality of the situation faced by customer" is not necessary a communication skill, but a way to collect data for an assessment or for monitoring. "Assisting the client in developing a clear plan of action" and "Encouraging the client to identify the alternative options" are counseling skills, but the discussions between the subjects of the research and the clients shown that the "specialists" don't have a plan, don't think about planning an intervention or the only plan was to see if the clients can obtain more welfare benefits.

Conclusion

Even if there's a major need at the local authorities level, awareness of the importance of social services can be made only by implementing some measures to promote them and through persons who know what does giving social services mean. At the moment, both are missing. The main resource of social work is the social worker, with his skills, knowledge, abilities and deontological values, but his access in the city hall is restricted by blocking the vacant jobs and through the absence of any laws that protect the profession.

The measures needed for raising the level of the quality and efficiency of the measures of social work in the rural area would be, in my opinion: unlocking the vacant jobs in the city halls; protecting the social workers' jobs: there must be a social worker post in every city hall or a social worker for a few rural localities, or the city hall can buy the services of an independent social worker; lobby for approving the law on evaluating the community needs, so that the projection of the social benefits will be made in a realist way, according to the community needs without a overlap and gaps in the social services network; implementing the law upon the quality of the social services (impossible to realize without the precedent two actions, this probably being the reason why they delay it for more than an year); encouraging the involvement of the NGOs in providing social services in the areas which cannot be covered by the public sector.

Quoting other authors, Ritala-Koskinen and Valokiv (2006, p. 7) shown that the social work has two traditions. First of them is client or case work and group work orientation and the second structural social work and community work orientation. In the rural social work, a single professional must combine both of them. He must be able to work directly with vulnerable persons and groups, but and be able organizing and managing services and processes, be able initiating and coordinating community development actions. „Assessment and development processes both in individual life situations and structural matters are core functions of social work.“ (idem) These central skills are obtained by training and practicing. Without an initial social work professional education, no practice will built alone skills like these. The idea that the community as a whole is the client of the rural social worker must be present all the time. Without this idea, is lost and the prevention, and it creates the premises for chronicizing the problems.

The development of the social work profession and to rural social work practice is a major need in Romania. The employment of qualified social workers in both rural and in specialized social services is essential in achieving this desideratum.

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