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The ethical coping and solution of stressful situations of social workers: Case of the Office of Labor, Social Affairs and Family in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

Ethics, human behavior, and stress management are concepts that accompany each person's private and professional life. As thoughtful beings, we encounter unpleasant or stressful situations every day. In the comfort of home, behind closed doors, people resort to various ways of coping with stress, but when they are in common work areas, close to clients or colleagues, the inability to escape from stress often provokes inappropriate reactions and behavior. The obligation to behave ethically is all the higher, the closer contact with clients the employee has with clients. The purpose of the paper is to analyze the state of ethical coping and solutions to stressful situations among social workers in the Office of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family in the selected city in Slovakia and then propose recommendations that could improve the situation.

Keywords: stressful situation; ethical behavior; social work; ethical coping; ethical solution

1. Introduction

Ethics, human behavior, and stress management are concepts that accompany each person's private and professional life. As thoughtful beings, we encounter unpleasant or stressful situations every day. In the comfort of home, behind closed doors, people resort to various ways of coping with stress, but when they are in common work areas, close to clients or colleagues, the inability to escape from stress often provokes inappropriate reactions and behavior. The obligation to behave ethically is all the higher, the closer contact with clients the employee has with clients.

Stress and coping are integral parts of daily life, as encounters with situations that require adjustment are commonplace[1].

The most used and cited generic definition of stress is from Selye (1975, 1976), who defined stress as[2,3]: Stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it.

According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology[4], stress is the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave. For example, it may be manifested by palpitations, sweating, dry mouth, shortness

of breath, fidgeting, accelerated speech, augmentation of negative emotions (if already being experienced), and a longer duration of stress fatigue. Severe stress is manifested by the general adaptation syndrome. By causing these mind-body changes, stress contributes directly to psychological and physiological disorders and diseases and affects mental and physical health, reducing quality of life.

According to Ice[5], stress in contemporary society, connotes a state of feeling overburdened, under pressure, emotionally taxed, and underresourced. Stress lets humans know that something is amiss.

The study by Fan et al.[6] shows that high job stress and high job demands were associated with greater symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The authors have been dealing with the issue of social work from many points of view for many years[7–15].

Social work is described by Barker[16] as a profession that promotes social change, solves problems in human relationships, and seeks to improve their prosperity. Using the theory of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes in areas where people interact with their environment. The principles of social justice and human rights are fundamental to social work. Feldman[17] brings the issue of social change to the forefront. Social work involves the gradual and slow accumulation of successes and reforms that improve everyone's lives. Social workers are like tireless lawyers; they form a critical part of this project. They work hard to improve the well-being of the population. They point to specific social or economic problems that are often ignored by society.

Social work is carried out by the above-mentioned social workers who, on the basis of personal choice, want and work with people and for people in order to provide them with help at a professional level[18]. They help solve clients' problems in sensitive ways, taking into account their personalities and the individual obstacles they face. Social workers must also strive to constantly improve and build strong social relationships with their clients. Furthermore, instead of engaging in social control practices that reinforce clients' marginality and diminish their life circumstances, social workers should help clients combat their problems on their own terms that are more sensitive to who they are and the obstacles they actually confront. To advance stable social relationships, it is also important to engage in practices that address the underlying conditions that generate the problems marginalized groups confront. For instance, social workers working with clients suffering from addiction and mental illness can help them find decent housing and advocate for social policies that create more affordable housing, as opposed to helping municipalities remove them from the streets and relocate them[17].

Social work ethics has come of age and matured into one of the most critically important domains in social work practice, education, and professional development. Social workers encounter various ethical issues in their work with individual clients, couples, families, and small groups. Social workers sometimes encounter challenging ethical dilemmas involving their relationships with colleagues. Complex situations can arise involving the management of confidential information, interdisciplinary collaboration, disputes with colleagues, consultation, boundary issues with colleagues, collegial impairment, the incompetence of colleagues, and the unethical conduct of colleagues[19,20].

Social work locates itself as a value-based profession. The profession would not hold such status without an ethical framework and code to practice social work purposes and functions. Without ethics, we could not apply the values and theories of social work at the micro- to macro-levels of practice[21].

Social work values and ethics have often been held out as unifying features of the profession. In cases where social workers struggle to practice ethically, they need to contend with the tensions between individual

rights and cultural sovereignty, between equality and non-discrimination, and the continuation of cultural practices that many would label harmful[22].

It can be said that the client is dependent on a social worker. His vulnerable position requires increased attention to the observance of ethical standards and rules by social workers.

The purpose of the paper is to analyze the state of ethical coping and the solution to the stressful situation of social workers in the Office of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family in the selected city in Slovakia and then propose recommendations that could improve the situation.

2. Methods

The main survey techniques used include a questionnaire, a personal interview with an office worker, and document analysis. The questionnaire served as a basic tool for gathering the necessary information and analyzing the current state of ethical coping and solutions to stressful situations for social workers in the office.

The questionnaire was designed with the active participation of the manager of the analyzed Local Labour Office, Social Affairs and Family and was approved by the analyzed office.

The first section of the questionnaire focused on ethical behavior. The purpose was to find out whether the employees in the office have a common value ladder, which values are important to them, and whether unethical behavior is penalized in some way. The second section of the questionnaire, dedicated to stress and stressful situations, aimed to find out which factors most negatively affect employees, what stress management techniques they would like to know more about, how often stressful situations occur in the office and whether employees talk about stress issues, also in the form of internal working meetings.

The first section of the questionnaire (focused on ethical behavior) consisted of five main questions and one sub-question. The first question was related to the violation of the rules of the Code of Ethics, with a sub-question in case of violation in relation to remorse. Since the existence of core values is essential for the proper function of any institution or organization, the second question was aimed at identifying the existence of core values of social workers that would be specific to the analyzed office, with the answer options of yes, no, and don't know. For the question focusing on the penalization of unethical behavior, respondents were given the option to select the type of penalization when answering yes. In the question focused on the importance of values in relation to the profession of social worker, they were asked to mark five values from the list provided, with the possibility to add other values. The first section of the questionnaire ended with question 5, in which respondents rated (on a scale of 1 to 5) their ability to be empathetic and assertive, whether they saw meaning in their work, whether they enjoyed doing it, and whether, as social workers, they worked to improve the well-being of the population.

The second section of the questionnaire, dedicated to stress and stressful situations, started with a question where respondents had the opportunity to indicate the factors that negatively affect them and their stress levels at work. They chose from a list of factors and had the option to add other factors. Question 7 was aimed at finding out if staff knew of anyone who had a problem with alcohol or other drug addictions. Question 8 was in the form of a table listing various stress management techniques. Respondents were asked to indicate which ones they were already actively using and also which ones they would like to learn more about. Of course, knowledge of possible stress management techniques is important, but the question remains whether workers have enough time to practice them effectively and sufficiently. This area was addressed in Question 9.

To properly cope with stress and stressful situations, knowledge is essential, not only about stress management techniques but also about the negative effects of stress and its possible causes. Question 10 asked about the current number of professional meetings (lectures, trainings, programs, or courses) focused on the

field that are offered to workers and whether this is satisfactory for the workers or whether they would like to see a different number.

Question 11 was used to find out whether internal workplace meetings on proper coping with stress are being held at the workplace. Workers are in constant contact with many different types of people at work, including different types of clients or colleagues themselves. This results in different types of stressful situations. Question 12 aims to find out what specific situations workers consider stressful. Respondents were given a choice. In addition to the type of stressful situations that occur in the workplace, the frequency of their occurrence is also important in the analysis of stressful situations that occur in the workplace. The excessive occurrence of stressful situations could be very harmful to the psyche of the workers. In question 13, respondents could respond to this issue in the form of a multiple-choice question. In question 14, respondents were given the opportunity to select from the options what behavior they exhibit in stressful situations. Question 15 then looked more closely at the intensity and impact of reactions caused by the accumulation of stress, negative feelings, or pressure. Respondents could choose from six options and indicate whether they attacked a colleague or client physically, verbally, or psychologically in a stressful situation. In order to properly cope with stressful situations in an ethical manner, it is essential to take care of your psychological and mental health. For this, professional support, which can also be provided by the workplace, is often essential. The first step is to acknowledge the psychological problems, as this is the only way to give the worker the help they need. In question 16, respondents were given the option to indicate whether they would disclose at work if they were having mental health problems. Question 17 was used to find out what support system respondents tend to turn to if they need social support to cope with stressful situations. One of the ways to cope with stress and stressful situations is through sufficient professional development. The last question of the main part of the questionnaire, question 18, investigated whether there is sufficient provision for professional development for workers in the workplace. That is, whether they have sufficient opportunity to attend courses and receive training that would improve their competence and skills.

The document analysis technique was used mainly in the analysis of the external and internal environment of the organization, as well as in the creation of sets of recommendations. In particular, the Code of Ethics for Civil Servant[23] and the annual reports of the Office of Labor, Social Affairs and Family[24] were used. The technique of a personal interview with a selected employee of the office was also used to gather the necessary information.

3. Findings

Social work is support provided to citizens in need, which is managed by the state and state institutions. Specifically, in Slovakia, it is the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family. It provides professional assistance and supervision to local authorities as well as labor, social affairs, and family offices. However, the Ministry also applies to its individual organizations the principles of equal treatment, gender equality, and equal opportunities. Teamwork and cooperation with other organizations are also important. The services of the ministry and its organizations are used daily by thousands of citizens belonging to different groups, minorities, or living conditions. It is the duty of all employees of labor offices to follow the usual code of ethics as they perform their work in the public interest. This code serves to guide the conduct of employees as well as to increase public confidence, honesty, and fairness in the conduct of employees of the Ministry. The Code is also the basis for promoting important values in this work.

There are currently 29 employees in the analyzed Local Labour Office, Social Affairs and Family, together with the manager, in six departments. A questionnaire survey was conducted to find out whether the employees of the workplace really follow the code of ethics even in stressful situations, how they can solve

stressful situations, and what real behavior appears in them. This was preceded by a short pre-test, which ensured the correctness of the questionnaire. 22 responses were collected.

Jobs are almost exclusively held by women with a university degree. Workers with more than 20 years of experience in social work predominate in the workplace, which corresponds to the average age of workers (51–60 years). The majority of workers (54.54% of respondents) behave ethically in the workplace; however, a relatively large number of workers (22.72%) did not know the answer to the question of whether they violated the rules written in the code of ethics. Therefore, not all employees are sufficiently familiar with the Code of Ethics and the specific rules written in it. The individual nature of the conscience and the remorse resulting from the breach of conduct were also confirmed. The presence of core values among social workers has not been confirmed at the workplace (stated by 68.18% of respondents).

Employees attach the greatest importance in their work to empathy (72.02% of respondents), professional approach (72.02%), responsibility (68.18%), customer service (63.63%), and human approach (59.02%). What is striking, however, is the fact that almost none of the respondents (4.54%) mentioned an important relationship with colleagues or self-control. Penalties are also important in preventing unethical behavior, but workers are generally unaware of their existence (as stated by 77.27% of respondents). Even a worker who knowingly violated the rules of the code of ethics stated that he did not know about the penalty. According to seven employees, the penalty currently takes the form of reprimand or a certain deduction from remuneration or wages. If this fact were better communicated to workers, they could avoid unethical behavior to a greater extent. With the importance that respondents have given empathy, it is reassuring to know that indeed, most of them consider themselves empathetic (77.27%). A smaller part of the respondents (40.90%) do not consider the well-being of the population and its building to be important, and they do not see the meaning in their work (13.63%), nor do they like it (4.54%). If employees like their job, they help clients of their own free will, and they will also perform it better and more efficiently. The more workers see meaning in their work, the better they have it, and vice versa. An atmosphere should be developed in the workplace that regularly reminds employees of the importance of their activities.

Workers consider negative relationships with colleagues (72.72%), work overload (63.63%), insufficient workplace equipment (54.54%), and a bad environment (50.00%) to be the most stressful. These are therefore factors relating exclusively to the workplace or the people in it. It is important that employees feel good at work and that it has a positive effect on them. The importance of good relations in the workplace is even more important. The survey confirmed that if collegial relationships are bad, employees perceive their surroundings all the more negatively. By correcting collegial relations, the perception of employees about the work environment and its equipment could also be improved. There has also been, or still is, a problem with alcohol or other drug addiction in the workplace in the past (stated by 27.27% of respondents). If workers are aware of this condition, they should report it immediately to their supervisor. This situation should be addressed immediately, as an addicted person can pose a significant risk to clients as well as to their colleagues.

Most workers fight against stress through physical activity (63.63%), planning (50.00%), or problem analysis (40.90%). They would like to know more about meditation (50.00%) or relaxation (50.00%). Most employees (68.18%) also stated that they did not have time to practice relaxation techniques during working hours but were interested in them. Workers are informed about stress and its proper management professionally, usually once a year or less than once a year. They would prefer more such meetings. Employees do not communicate about stress internally, in the form of group meetings. Internal business meetings could be a good, relatively inexpensive alternative to professional lectures or courses. It is interesting that more than contact with clients, there are stressful conflicts with the superior (72.72%) or other colleagues (72.72%). As the presence of negative collegial relations has been confirmed, this problem should be actively addressed. All

employees should be aware of how important a good working atmosphere is, how its absence is negatively affected when working with clients, and how they should work to improve it. Among the clients, the most stressful for the respondents are risky, aggressive, or manipulative clients (68.18%). The perception of stress and stressful situations is quite individual and has no connection with years of experience in social work. There are also workers who experience stressful situations every day (22.72%), as well as those who experience them only exceptionally, a few times a year (27.27%). When experiencing stressful situations, the respondents show the most feelings of restlessness (45.45%), anger (36.36%), irritability (36.36%), frustration (31.81%), or increased emotion (31.81%). Those who experience stressful situations on a daily basis tend to have increased irritability, anger, or anxiety, i.e., behavior that should clearly not occur during the work of a social worker. No respondent has yet resorted to physical violence. Psychological manipulation, or blackmail, prevails over colleagues (22.72%). On the other hand, verbal attacks in the form of insults or screams prevail over clients (22.72%).

As there is often a dangerous stigma in the work environment, but especially in social work, which prevents workers from acknowledging mental problems, which only leads to their increase, it is important that this stigma disappears from the workplace. Although almost half of the respondents (40.90%) would admit mental problems, there are still more than half of those who did not (or could not express themselves) (59.10%). The support system of most workers (54.54%) takes the form of family or friends; only a small number of respondents sought social support from colleagues (22.72%) or professionals (9.09%). Professional growth is also an important tool in the fight against stress. Although certain forms of education are provided to workers, they are not sufficient, especially for those who are actively working on their education. Ensuring professional growth is an issue that should be dealt with by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic so that it is sufficiently secured for all offices.

4. Conclusion

Based on the obtained results, taking into account the theoretical basis, we propose a set of recommendations that can improve the situation of ethical coping and the solution of stressful situations in the workplace. As already mentioned, in social work as a helping profession, the client is dependent on social workers; he is vulnerable. The necessity of complying with ethical rules and principles is therefore very high. We believe that prevention is the best medicine, so workers should try to avoid and prevent unethical behavior. Several tools can be used for this purpose, including reducing the level of stress in the workplace, adopting and reminding them of what social work actually means, what social workers need to be prepared for, and what is expected of them. The recommendations consist of the following parts:

- implementation of internal workshops into the work process,
- decalogue of social workers,
- core values of social workers.

4.1. Implementation of internal workshops into the work process

To cope with stress, it is important to regularly inform social workers about appropriate techniques and remind them of the negative effects of stress. The questionnaire survey showed that there is a certain tension between the workers, which causes stress. Collegial relations are disrupted. To eliminate these problems, we propose the introduction of internal workshops, which currently, according to the respondents, do not take place.

We suggest that these meetings take place once a month. Workers are relatively busy; work meetings are supposed to help them establish better relationships and reduce stress; if they were burdensome, their primary

meaning would not be achieved. We suggest that meetings always take place on Thursdays, as there are so-called non-official days at the office on Thursdays.

Table 1 contains a plan of topics for twelve working meetings, i.e., a total of one year. After this one-year period, the theme plan may be repeated. Repetition of individual topics would help employees better remember individual knowledge from them, and regular interviews would strengthen their collegial relations. If necessary, individual topics can be changed or adjusted after a year, according to the current needs of employees or current problems that have occurred in the workplace.

Table 1. Plan of internal workshops topics.

| Number	Workshop topic
1	Informing social workers about the meaning and significance of the establishment of internal working meetings
2	The meaning of social work
3	Principles of conduct in the public interest (Code of Ethics for Civil Servant)
4	Penalization of unethical behavior
5	Core values of social worker
6	Stress and its symptoms
7	The way to effective solution of stressful situation
8	Techniques for coping with stress
9	The procedure for dealing with problematic situations
10	Alcoholism
11	Collegial relations—Interview
12	Collegial relations—Team-building activities

4.2. Decalogue of social worker

Based on a detailed analysis of the following sources[7,8,13,14,17,18] we present ten rules that should not be forgotten in the performance of social work—the decalogue of social workers:

1) I comply with and follow the rules set out in the Code of Ethics for Civil Servant.

2) I can purposefully control myself and my actions.

3) If I make a mistake, make a bad decision, or misbehave, I can reflect on my actions. I regularly think about myself and analyze my ideas. Based on my own experience, I learn and improve.

4) I am ready to accept my weakness, vulnerability, and imperfection at any time. Social workers also need help.

5) I am assertive. I have no problem enforcing my opinion, but I also respect the opinions of others. I can work with others and listen to others with understanding. I am a team player.

6) Regardless of gender, race, age, or education, I accept the rights of all and respect their privacy. I take an individual approach to solving the client's problems.

7) I make sure that my behavior is professional, courteous, and of a high standard. But I am not afraid to show a friendly, empathetic face.

8) I build strong relationships not only with clients but also with colleagues, as I know that this increases mutual trust, which leads to simplified work and better results.

9) I stand responsibly towards my duties and work; I keep my promises and agreements.

10) I try to develop my professional knowledge, as it is the role of a social worker, to improve so that I can better serve people.

4.3. Core values of social worker

Every organization needs a certain moral basis in the form of values with which employees should be identified and followed. The results of the analysis showed that a specific moral basis in the form of values is missing in the workplace. First of all, it is important that all selected values are in accordance with the principles of the Code of Ethics for Civil Servant. In order for employees to truly embrace and follow these values, it is essential that they identify with them. The values must correspond to the moral attitudes of specific social workers in order to be unique in the workplace. All the proposed values are equally important and aim at a common goal, namely the ethical behavior of social workers (**Figure 1**).
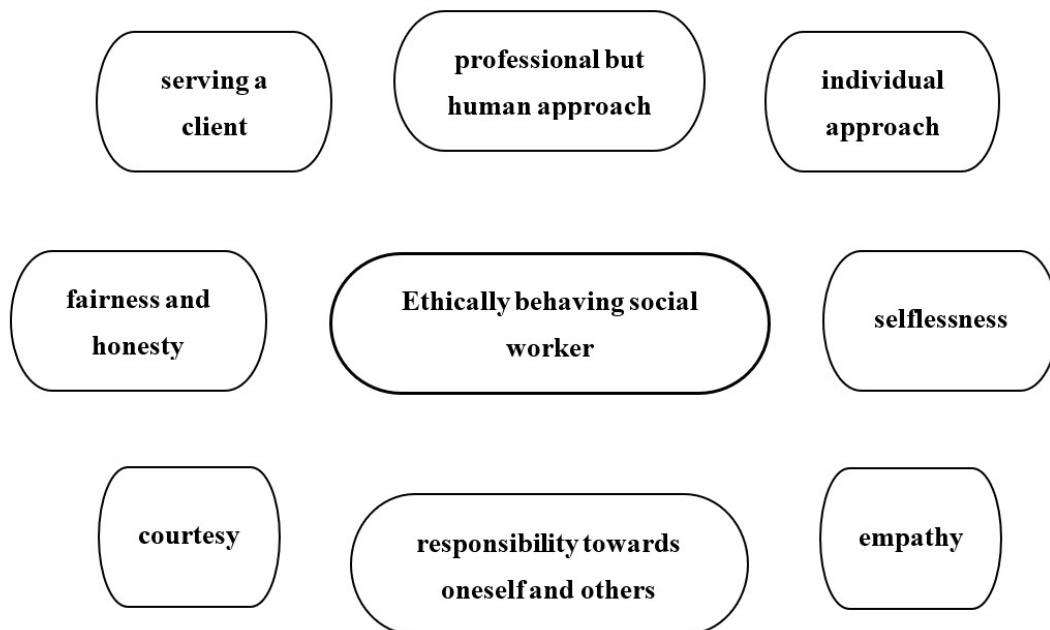
Figure 1. Core values of social worker.

The first value is serving a client, as it is the basis of any social work. The client's needs should be a priority for every social worker.

Then follows the value of professionalism, but taking into account a human, friendly approach. Employees should strive to serve clients as professionally as possible in order to effectively solve their problems and difficulties. However, clients in difficult life situations also need to feel safe with social workers and that they can trust them.

Another value is responsibility, i.e., a responsible approach to oneself but also to others, regardless of whether they are clients or colleagues. Social workers should take the utmost responsibility for every situation or problem. In connection with responsibility, there is the value of fairness and honesty. It is essential that social workers do not lie and mislead others. They should be honest in their work and keep in mind the applicable ethical and legal standards.

The value of empathy follows, i.e., the ability to empathize with the feelings of others. This value is very closely related to the value of the individual approach. Not every client and case are the same. Social workers should be able to analyze each case separately regarding its individual circumstances. The value of selflessness follows, as workers must not abuse their position; on the contrary, they must act solely in the public interest.

The last value chosen is courtesy, which represents, at first glance, the simple but essentially fundamental value of social work. The social worker should behave in such a way as to maintain and strengthen public confidence in the state and public administration. Even such a simple thing as offering a glass of water, opening the door for the client, or using exclusively literary, non-vulgar expressions can shape the client's overall relationship not only to the social worker but also the client's overall relationship to the state and public administration as a whole. The social worker must therefore observe the principles of good and courteous behavior.

During stressful situations, when social workers are under strong pressure and often controlled by various negative emotions, these core values will serve as an aid in differentiating between good and bad behavior. Core values of social workers in employees stimulate intellectual reflection on whether their actions are morally correct. It is important that employees constantly remember these values and do not forget them. Social workers often cannot afford to run away from stressful situations; they have to face them and learn to manage them.

Limitations of the study are related to the results of the survey, which are influenced by the current state of mind of the staff of the office under study, the composition of the work team, and the types of clients. We are of the opinion that the given procedures and findings can be applied to other organizations dealing with social work and coming into contact with diverse, often aggressive clients.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, RJ, MJ and IG; methodology, RJ and IG; writing—original draft preparation, RJ, MJ and IG; writing—review and editing, MJ and RJ; visualization, RJ; supervision, MJ. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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