



ORIGINAL PAPER

Multifaceted Assistential Identity

Elena-Diana Zăstran¹⁾, Lavinia Elisabeta Popp²⁾,
Claudiu Mihail Roman³⁾

Abstract:

The tendency to change, towards a multifaceted identity, becomes an inherent quality of social work. Social work and assistance as an independent subject was formed at the intersection of several fields, including psychology, sociology, medicine, political science, etc. In this respect, we mention the multitude of roles that a practicing social worker fulfils, among which we mention the role of counselor. In general, social workers use a variety of counseling approaches to help individuals, families, and communities overcome their challenges and enhance their quality of life. Establishing the therapeutic relationship is an essential part of the counseling process, for a positive change in the client's life, which means gaining trust, feeling comfort and safety, inherent steps for sharing personal information with the counselor. The present exploratory study was carried out by applying qualitative methods: interview and focus group, to a sample of 10 specialists in psycho-social counseling, from Caraș-Severin county. The examples of good practices highlighted during the meetings served as support for concretizing the importance of building an effective therapeutic relationship.

Keywords: *Multifaceted identity; social assistance; counseling; therapeutic relationship; trust relationship; professional roles.*

¹ PhD Student, West University of Timișoara, Romania, Email: diana_diana824@yahoo.com

² Professor, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca– Reșița University Center, Romania, Email:lavinia.popp@ubbcluj.ro

³ PhD University Assistant, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca – Reșița University Center (Romania), Email: claustimro@yahoo.com

Multifaceted Assistential Identity

Introduction

The delimitation of social assistance as a profession is based on a system of fundamental values, essential in the constitution of this subject from a methodological point of view, because it guides the activity of social workers and enables them to provide quality services to vulnerable people. As components of this value system, we recall the respect for fundamental human rights, the dignity and integrity of the human being, the recognition of democracy as an essential requirement of social life. (CNASR, 2007). According to the author Dumitraşcu, in nursing practice it is important to interweave the skills of communication for social workers, referring to the ability to listen actively, respond empathetically and clarify information, in interdependence with the skills methodological skills, which include the ability to identify problems, to investigate, to work in a team, and to research and write in a scientific manner (Dumitraşcu, 2012).

In the helping process, the social worker helps the clients to overcome their life difficulties, meet their psychosocial needs and feel safe and comfortable during work sessions. To achieve this, both theoretical knowledge and certain practical skills are used, selected and adapted according to the characteristics, needs and context of each situation. Social assistance as an independent subject was formed at the intersection of several fields: psychology, sociology, medicine, political science, etc. In strengthening this idea, we mention the multitude of roles that a practicing social worker fulfills, given the fact that this profession looks at the client as a "system", aiming at the whole of emotions, feelings, targeted problems, internal and external resources, including the environment and the community in which he lives. Against this background, we use the term "social worker" or "counselor" to refer to a specialist accredited to provide help in the form of psycho-social counseling. (US Bureau of Labor Statistics; Social Work Haven)

Among the essential forms of intervention through which specialised help is offered, we should highlight the counseling activity, borrowed as a resource from psychology, characterized as "a professional helping relationship, based on trust and respect, between a qualified counselor and a person facing a problem or a difficulty". (American Counseling Association) Counseling is a professional process that involves assisting individuals or groups in solving problems, making decisions, developing skills and managing personal or professional difficulties. This may include various approaches and techniques meant to provide emotional support, guidance and practical solutions in various areas such as mental health, education, career or interpersonal relationships. The International Association for Counseling (IAC) defines counseling as "an educational, preventive and curative intervention aimed at developing human potential and increasing problem-solving capacity", while the European Association for Counseling (EAC) refers to "a process of supporting and professional guidance that helps people understand and solve their problems".

Diverse approaches to counseling in social work

There are different types of counseling in social work, each with its own focus and approach. Some of the more common types of counseling in social work include:

- **Marriage and family counseling:** this type of counseling focuses on helping couples and families resolve conflicts and improve communication skills

- Career guidance and counseling: this type of counseling helps individuals identify their strengths and interests and make informed decisions about their education and career path.
- Rehabilitation counseling: this type of counseling helps people with disabilities or chronic illnesses overcome barriers to employment and achieve greater independence
- Substance abuse counseling: this type of counseling helps people overcome addiction and develop strategies for maintaining sobriety
- Mental health counseling: this type of counseling helps people deal with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and trauma.
- Crisis counseling: this type of counseling provides immediate support and intervention to people experiencing a crisis or traumatic event.
- Group counseling: this type of counseling involves bringing people with similar challenges or experiences together to share their thoughts and feelings and provide mutual support
- School counseling: this type of counseling helps pupils and students overcome academic, social, and emotional challenges and develop skills to succeed in school and beyond
- Community counseling: this type of counseling focuses on improving the well-being of communities by addressing social and economic issues and promoting social justice. (Fatma, 2021; US Bureau of Labor Statistics ; Drobot, 2013)

In general, social workers use a variety of counseling approaches to help individuals, families, and communities overcome challenges and enhance their quality of life.

Principles of counseling

Counseling in social work is guided by several principles that form the foundation of ethical and effective practice. These principles include:

- Self-determination: a fundamental principle of social assistance. It emphasizes the importance of granting respect and autonomy to people seeking help. In the context of counseling, self-determination means that the recipient is the one who decides whether he wants to undergo counseling and what the goals of the counseling are. The counselor must respect the client's right to make his own decisions and help him clarify his goals.
- Confidentiality: It ensures that the information discussed during counseling is confidential and will not be disclosed without the client's consent. The adviser has an obligation to keep the information received from the client confidential, unless it is necessary to protect the safety of the client or others.
- Empathy: is the ability to understand and accept another's perspective. In the context of counseling, empathy is important to build a trusting relationship and help the client feel understood and accepted. The counselor must be able to understand the client's feelings and experiences and accept them without judgment.
- Validation: is the process of acknowledging and confirming another person's feelings and experiences. In the counseling context, validation is important to help the client feel understood and accepted. The counselor must validate the client's feelings and experiences, even if they are negative or difficult to accept.

Multifaceted Assistential Identity

- Support: it is provided by the counselor to assist the client in the process of change. The counselor must be a source of support for the client, offering encouragement, compassion, and understanding. The counselor must be present and attentive to the client's needs and help him overcome difficulties. (Dumitraşcu, 2012; CNASR, 2007; IASW, 2018)

Building the therapeutic relationship

Counseling is based on the creation of a therapeutic relationship, often between two people, but sometimes between a number of individuals or a group and another person, called a group counselor. Key aspects of counseling are (Hough, 2010):

- it implies a relationship that is based on support;
- it is based on the principles of client empowerment;
- it is based on confidentiality
- it helps clients identify their own resources.

Studies show that counseling is a transformative process that helps people learn how to use and develop their own resources. This is because it gives beneficiaries an opportunity to explore their issues in a safe and accepting environment. The counselor can help the client understand his problems, develop new perspectives, and identify the resources he needs to cope with his situation. (Egenti, 2016; Egbo, 2013)

The study of Bordin (1979) identifies three components of the therapeutic relationship:

- Agreement: based on trust and mutual respect;
- Affiliation: based on a sense of belonging and acceptance;
- Common purpose: based on a willingness to work together to achieve a common goal.

A decade later, Horvath and Greenberg (1989) propose a model of the therapeutic relationship development, which includes the following stages:

- Training: client and counselor get to know each other and begin to build trust;
- Exploration: the client explores his or her problems and begins to develop a new perspective thereon;
- Establishment: client and counselor come to a common understanding of the issues and how they can be addressed;
- Resolution: the client achieves the set goals and ends the counseling process.

These approaches conclude that the therapeutic relationship is a complex process, influenced by a variety of factors. To build an effective therapeutic relationship, the counselor must be aware of these influences, choose an approach adapted to the specific needs of the client.

Establishing the therapeutic relationship is an essential part of the counseling process. An effective therapeutic relationship is the foundation for positive change in the client's life, which means gaining trust, feeling comfortable and safe to share personal information with the counselor. Building trust takes time and effort, and the counselor must be patient and respectful of the client. (Lockton, 2022)

The counseling space should be organized and shaped as a safe, open and accepting environment where the client feels comfortable opening up. This can be achieved by creating a warm and friendly atmosphere, active listening and expressing empathy, but without neglecting the aspects of an inviting, warm setting with specific props (e.g. toys for counseling children). (Anwar & Daino, 2023)

The counselor must not fail to apply the principle of mutual respect. This can be achieved by respecting client confidentiality, taking responsibility for your own actions and providing constructive feedback. On a similar note, in order to make the therapeutic process more efficient, the client demonstrates his or her respect for the partnership with the specialist by respecting the indications received, reciprocity in gestures, respecting appointments, punctuality, etc. (Sutton, 2021)

Last but not least, the counselor must focus on the specific needs of the client. This involves understanding the client's problems and their goals, but also making sure that there is an equivalence between the problems identified by the client and those identified by the counselor. After the priorities are clarified, the counseling approach is adapted according to them. (DeAngelis, 2019; Ardito& Rabellino, 2011; APA Principles, 2017)

Methodological dimension of the applied study

Using the applied design, the present study focused on a qualitative research, using two research methods, the interview and the focus group.

Focus group is a qualitative research method that involves a group discussion between a moderator and subjects; it is used when the researcher wants to collect data from a group of people who have common experience or opinion about a certain topic. In the present research, the choice of this method was ideal to reach an ideal number of subjects in a common context, while facilitating communication between them and the researcher, through the feeling of familiarity with the subject and by sharing individual examples from practice.

The interview is a qualitative research method that involves a conversation between a researcher and a subject. This method was a help for the specialists who could not merge at the time of the organization with the focus group, but who reported notable details for outlining some relevant conclusions. The research group was formed by 20 specialists in psycho-social counseling, either social workers or educational counselors, from Caraș-Severin County.

The purpose of the qualitative research was an exploratory one, for which the interview guide was applied to a number of 10 social workers from Caraș-Severin, starting from a simple question (How do you build the therapeutic relationship of trust with the beneficiaries?) and directing the discussion according to the degree of openness of each specialist. On the same note, the focus group made up of 10 social workers from Reșita started with the same question, later giving way to various examples from the practice of the specialists invited to take part in the study.

These analyses contribute to the comprehension and explanation of social reality from multiple perspectives. The specialists in the present epistemological approach know, through the individual theoretical study, but especially through the empirical study, the importance of establishing a relationship of trust with the beneficiary, a condition for a successful premise. Among the techniques used by social workers and educational counselors, some of the essential elements of successful communication were highlighted: a warm tone of voice, a smiling and open attitude, non-verbal and paraverbal language that avoids barriers, semi-formal clothing, in pleasant and warm colors, etc.

It was found that a good number of specialists pay special attention to the counseling practice, in order to ensure a welcoming environment with a "homy" air, decorated to trigger visual, auditory, olfactory and kinesthetical stimulation for the

Multifaceted Assistential Identity

beneficiaries. Identifying during the discussion the opportunity to find out which category of beneficiaries, in relation to age, presents more skepticism, and consequently, more rigidity in the therapeutic process, the specialists who work particularly or exclusively with adults self-reported. The other "side of the barricade", consisting of specialists focused on working with children, pointed out in their turn the fact that, sometimes, even they run into the rigidity of adults, exemplifying the discussions with the parents of the beneficiaries. This aspect highlights the fact that, with age, people lose their childlike innocence and curiosity due to the fact that they encounter situations in which they lose various resources, their trust is betrayed, they have not had healthy emotional attachments with family members, and consequently, they develop coping mechanisms that act as a barrier in the professional helping process.

At the end of the work sessions, the specialists (13 social workers and 7 educational counselors) were generous to share suggestions or models of good practice, as they found a considerable success rate in the interventions carried out. Among these models, we may list an increased attention to details, both in the discourse of the beneficiaries and vis-à-vis their own therapeutic gestures and discourses. They also pointed out the fact that they worked carefully on presenting the benefits of counseling and identifying the personal resources of the beneficiaries, from a perspective in which to clarify the fact that the relationship between the specialist and the beneficiary is a reversible partnership of help, not a dynamic based on a superiority/inferiority relationship.

In lieu of conclusions

Social work counseling is a form of psycho-social intervention that provides support and guidance to people experiencing major difficulties. The social worker is a qualified professional who has knowledge and skills in sociology, psychology and communication. Counseling can be provided on an individual, family or group level. The goal of this intervention is to help people develop their coping skills, improve their quality of life, and achieve their set goals. The social worker fulfills several essential roles and responsibilities within the community or the institutions in which they work, among which the roles of educator, therapist, psychologist, mediator, lawyer, facilitator of possibilities, etc. stand out.

The assistential counselor worked closely with clients to establish counseling goals and develop an intervention plan; used a variety of techniques such as active listening, reflection, validation, problem solving and conflict resolution.

Establishing the therapeutic relationship is an essential part of the counseling process. An effective therapeutic relationship is essential for positive change in the client's life, which means trust, to feel comfort and safety, to open up and share personal information with the counselor. Building trust requires time and effort, the counselor must be patient, respect the client's decisions.

Authors' Contributions

The authors contributed equally to this work.

References:

- Anwar, B., Daino, J. (2023). *How to Build a Therapeutic Relationship with Clients*. TalkSpace Therapy Blog <https://www.talkspace.com/blog/build-therapist-client-relationship/>
- Ardito RB., Rabellino D. (2011). *Therapeutic alliance and outcome of psychotherapy: Historical excursus, measurements, and prospects for Research*. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2011; 2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3198542/>
- Bordin, E. (1979). *The generalizability of the psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance*. *PSYCHOTHERAPY: THEORY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE VOLUME 16, #3*
- DeAngelis, T. (2019). *Better relationships with patients lead to better outcomes*. *50(10):38*. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/11/ce-corner-relationships>
- Drobot, L. (2013). *Social Work Counseling*. *Applied Social Psychology* (pp.51 – 59) Chapter: Chapter One
- Dumitrascu, H. (2012). *Counseling in social assistance* (in original in Romanian). Polyrom. Iași
- Egbo, AC. (2013). *Development of Guidance and counseling*. Enugu: Joe best publishers
- Egenti, NT. (2016). *The role of Guidance and Counseling in effective teaching and learning in schools*. *RAY: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, Volume I, No. 2, October, 2016, pp. 36-48.
- Fatma, S. (2021). *Counseling in Social Work: A Specialized Area of Social Work*. Delhi
- Horvath, AO., Greenberg, LS. (1989). Development and Validation of the Working Alliance Inventory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 36, 223-233.
- Hough, M. (2010). *Counseling skills and Theory*, Hodder Education
- Sutton, J. (2021). *How to Build a Strong Therapeutic Relationship With Clients*. *Positive Psychology Blog*. <https://positivepsychology.com/components-of-therapeutic-relationship/>
- Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. American Psychological Association <https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index>.
- International Association of Social Work (IASW). (2018). *Ethical Principles of Social Work*. <https://www.iassw-aiets.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Global-Social-Work-Statement-of-Ethical-Principles-IASSW-27-April-2018-1.pdf>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm>.
- School of Social Work, University Buffalo : <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/admissions/is-social-work-right-career-for-me/what-is-social-work.html>
- CNASR. (2007). *The ethical code of the social worker profession* (in original in Romanian). Official Gazette of Romania https://www.cnasr.ro/storage/app/media/uploads/12c6a09675620f589055800ba6ceceee/2017/06/Codul_deontologic_al_profesiei_de_asistent_social.pdf
- American Counseling Association <https://www.counseling.org/about-us/what-is-a-counselor>
- International Association for Counseling <https://www.iac-irtac.org/?q=node/227>
- Social Work Haven <https://socialworkhaven.com/what-are-the-10-roles-of-social-workers/>

Multifaceted Assistential Identity

Article Info

Received: May 18 2024

Accepted: May 30 2024

How to cite this article:

Zăstran, E.-D., Popp, L.E., Roman, C.M. (2024). Multifaceted Assistential Identity. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 82, pp. 22 – 29.