

New Trends in the Communication of Social Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a qualitative study conducted between April and July 2020, aiming to identify the new trends in the communication process between social workers and beneficiaries, social workers and colleagues in multidisciplinary team, as well as among social workers and other specialists from public and/or private institutions in Timiș County (Romania), specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research method used was the semi-structured interview addressed to 23 social workers in Timiș County. The main results of the study revealed certain communication barriers during the state of emergency between social workers and other social actors with which they interacted, as well as new adaptation strategies in the communication process.

Keywords: social work, communication, social workers, pandemic, COVID-19, Romania

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused multiple changes in the way social workers work, both in the intervention process for beneficiaries of social services and in the interaction with beneficiaries, colleagues, or other social actors in the community. The measures implemented during this period aimed primarily at preventing SARS-CoV-2 virus infection and brought about a number of challenges for specialists, including interaction and communication with all social actors in their professional activity.

Social workers are specialists working in the first line, contributing to the social welfare of vulnerable groups. In situations of pandemic, social workers are vital and they support adapting services and for vulnerable people. (Paul, Bruin &

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Taylor, 2020: 787-788) Under ordinary circumstances, social workers work in a common space with other persons, beneficiaries or colleagues, whether they operate on the field, at the home of beneficiaries or in centres, using verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Observing government regulations imposed during the COVID pandemic, the activity of social workers in residential centres took place in the centres, with specialists being isolated at work for two weeks (MAI, 2020: 3-4; Trancă, 2021), and social workers working in day centres had the work suspended during the state of emergency (ANPDCA, 2020). During the state of alert, direct communication between beneficiaries and their families was limited, alongside the provision of alternative sources of communication (telephone, video, electronic means). (MMPS, 2020: 2). In this context, the interaction and communication between social workers during the pandemic brought about certain changes and adaptations. (Banks *et al.*, 2020: 572; Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020: 67; Lightfoot & Moone, 2020; Miller & Lee, 2020; Mishna *et al.*, 2020; Cabiati, 2021: 8; Trancă, 2021: 176) Studies conducted during the pandemic share certain challenges common to social workers. (Dauti *et al.*, 2020: 642)

In order to keep in touch with the beneficiaries, but also to carry out certain types of activities, social workers adopted information and communication tools specific to remote communication, such as social networking, videoconferencing applications, and a channel improvement has been highlighted in the communication with beneficiaries in situations of social exclusion (Redondo-Sama *et al.*, 2020).

2. Research Methodology

The present study aimed at identifying new trends in the communication process between social workers and beneficiaries, social workers and colleagues in multidisciplinary team, as well as between social workers and other specialists in public and/or private institutions in Timiș County, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The *objectives* of the research aimed at exploring the difficulties encountered by social workers in communicating with social actors with which they interacted during the states of emergency and alert, at identifying strategies to adapt the communication of social workers during the pandemic period, as well as at examining the perceptions of social workers on the new trends in communicating with social actors.

The research *procedure* relied on the development of research methodology, data collection, analysis of results through the NVivo qualitative analysis software, and the research report. The programming of online interviews took place by mutual agreement, after the participants received information on the purpose and objectives of the research, as well as the informed consent to participate in the study, where aspects of confidentiality of information and the rights of participants in the study were described. The access link was transmitted and 7 participants agreed to be part of it, including of the interview recording. Interviews lasted about one hour.

The research design is a descriptive one, the research *method* used being the semi-structured interview applied online through Google Meet and Zoom applications, between April and July 2020. Participation in the study was not associated with any psychic, physical, social or legal damage.

The research instrument was the semi-structured interview guide organized on topics such as difficulties encountered by social workers in their communication with beneficiaries, colleagues, and other community specialists; strategies to adapt communication with each of those mentioned; perceptions of social workers on the new trends in communicating with these actors.

Study *participants* were 23 social workers in Timiș County, Romania, working in public and private institutions providing social services in day and residential centres.

3. Results

This study screened a number of features of new social worker communication trends. These trends are different, depending on the type of service in which social workers are working: the pandemic context has produced different changes in adapting the communication process in residential social services to day centres.

Residential centres participating in the study included institutions such as placement centres, family-type houses, maternity centres, empowerment and rehabilitation centres, and protected housing. Day centres participating in the study included day centres for children at risk of separation from parents, day centres for counselling and support for parents and children, and day recovery centres for children with disabilities.

Since, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers were isolated for 14 days in residential centres, and before and after the workplace isolation period, a series of changes occurred in both the communication with the beneficiaries and with their relatives, and with colleagues in multidisciplinary teams or with other social actors in the community: for example, collaborators from public or private institutions, partners, etc. Other communication trends were seen among the social workers in the day centres because, in their case, face-to-face activities were suspended during the state of emergency and, partially, and during the state of alert (only some centres had their face-to-face activities suspended during the state of alert): in most cases, they took place online. In this context, a number of difficulties were revealed by the study participants, which are described below.

3.1. Difficulties Encountered by Social Workers in Communicating with Beneficiaries

For social workers in residential centres, because of isolation at work, a number of challenges made beneficiaries understand the arguments of their isolation in the centre. Beneficiaries found it difficult to adapt to new safety measures imposed in order to prevent the spread of the SARS CoV-2 virus, which caused, in some cases,

the intensification of conflicting relations between beneficiaries. In these situations, social workers from residential centres capitalized on mediation skills between beneficiaries, more present during this period.

Another aspect mentioned by social workers in residential centres was linked to the time dedicated to communication with the beneficiaries and, in this respect, two trends were observed: on the one hand, a positive aspect, because social workers had more time to communicate directly with the beneficiaries and, especially, to counsel them and, on the other hand, a negative aspect, as there was no clear distinction between the working time of the social worker and his/her personal time. Although social workers had a resting space apart from that of the beneficiaries, the 8 hours of work per day were not observed and social workers were permanently available for the beneficiaries, including at night, if the case (e.g., to mediate conflicts between the beneficiaries, to request an ambulance, to manage the situations of panic among beneficiaries, etc.).

During the pandemic, wearing facial protective masks, as well as other means of protection (facial protection screen, gloves, etc.), or keeping a physical distance were enforced by public health regulations. While wearing them, for both beneficiaries and social workers, nonverbal communication was limited. Situations were mentioned when social workers found it difficult to observe or understand the facial expressions of the beneficiaries, their emotions, or reactions.

Because external visits were banned in the centre, communication with beneficiaries was made exclusively by means of remote communication, respectively by phone calls or video calls, using especially WhatsApp applications, Facebook Messenger, Skype, and Zoom. Thus, there have been difficulties in communication, especially related to the lack of devices that use these applications or the lack of knowledge about the use of the above-mentioned applications.

Social workers in the day centres identified difficulties in communicating with beneficiaries as a result of suspension of face-to-face activities and continuing activities via telephone communication or video calls. Thus, the frequency of communication with the beneficiaries and their relatives decreased and, as the time passed, involvement in the beneficiaries' online activities began to decline. Social workers mentioned a gradual emotional detachment between themselves and the beneficiaries, appreciating this online work experience as a "relationship test with the beneficiaries".

In situations where only telephone conversations were possible, social workers mentioned a difficulty related to the lack of non-verbal feedback from their beneficiaries or their relatives; in situations of video calls, limitations of nonverbal feedback were mentioned, especially for body position. There was low focus of the beneficiaries on the moments in which the communication took place face-to-face.

Another difficulty mentioned by the participants in the study regarded the confidentiality of the beneficiary's information, in the context in which he/she was not alone because the space could not ensure intimacy. Often, their relatives were

around, so they did not feel comfortable with sharing certain information, and their answers were rather controlled.

Other difficulties were linked to the lack of telephones necessary to use video communication applications; poor application use skills; poor Internet connection, especially for beneficiaries coming from rural areas, producing disturbances in mutual understanding of messages; the existence of a single family phone, which led to the need to adapt the social workers' work program according to the availability of a phone (e.g., in the morning and in the afternoon, children had classes online, and the social worker could talk to them only in the evening).

3.2. Difficulties Encountered by Social Workers in Communication with Colleagues in the Multidisciplinary Team

Communication of social workers with colleagues in the multidisciplinary team highlighted different difficulties between social workers in residential centres and day centres.

During the workplace isolation in residential centres, teams formed by specialists were carrying on their alternative activities for 14 days. Thus, the team present at work was incomplete, which contributed to reducing communication with other colleagues who were in home isolation. There was a request for some activities that had to be carried out by social workers outside the centre, and colleagues' response situations were different: in most of the centres, colleagues responded promptly to social workers' requests, while, in other centres, these requests were denied or produced tensions between colleagues. Started and unfinished tasks were transmitted to colleagues either via electronic mail or through notes left on the desk or in certain dossiers at the centre's headquarters.

A difficult aspect was in connection with communication with unemployed colleagues or who had a maximum of one year of work, especially because the management skills of crisis situations were limited. Social workers who highlighted these aspects also mentioned the presence of professional burnout during the pandemic.

For social workers in the day centres, the difficulties consisted in particular in adapting to the use of remote communication because of the limited use of newly agreed applications, audio and video, for example, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet or Zoom.

3.3. Difficulties Encountered by Social Workers in Communication with Other Social Actors

Other social actors are, in the context of the present research, other social workers from public, private, or national institutions, other specialists from public or private institutions in the community or at national level, supervisors of social workers, collaborators or partners, students who perform internships, or volunteers.

The difficulties highlighted by social workers in residential and day centres were similar. During the state of emergency, for a limited period, the activities of public or private institutions in the community were suspended, which led to a lack of communication with them. Subsequently, alternative measures were introduced via phone or e-mail communication and, in this respect, the difficulties were linked to the adaptation of the use of these means of communication, which proved to be very useful and appreciated by social workers. Social workers needed training for the use of these means, and they self-taught by tracking free tutorials.

Other difficulties concerned delays of responses from institutions or even difficulties in connection with certain communication platforms proposed by partners. A difficulty highlighted by all participants in the study was the protection of personal data of the beneficiaries, with the transmission of information to public or private institutions by means of online communication, in the context in which the submission of documents is made exclusively online, and the platforms used did not guarantee maximum security.

Because activities with students in practical internships were suspended before the state of emergency, social workers in residential centres could not maintain communication with students. In day centres, with the implementation of online activities with the beneficiaries, new measures were adapted regarding the interaction of beneficiaries with internship students or online volunteers.

3.4. Adaptation Strategies in Social Workers' Communication

The context of COVID-19 pandemic caused social workers adapt their communication both with their beneficiaries and their own colleagues or other social actors. Thus, in addition to rethinking the functioning of the activities according to the job description, a rethinking of the communication process specific to each activity was necessary. Both residential and day centres developed, in a very short time, new working procedures adapted to the prevention measures specific to SARS CoV-2 virus infection, procedures that were also provided for communication with beneficiaries or team-mates. These procedures were endorsed by the Public Health Directorate.

Information messages were displayed on the prevention of SARS-CoV-2, including messages adapted to the level of understanding of children or people with intellectual disabilities (e.g., observing physical distance; correct hand washing; the correct wearing of the protective mask; use of disinfectants; coverage of coughing and sneezing; use of carpet with disinfectants; observance of markings for keeping physical distance; maintaining hygiene in the room, etc.).

New tasks for social workers appeared regarding the information accessible to the beneficiaries on COVID-19 infection, on symptoms, transmission, and prevention measures; periodic information for beneficiaries on stress and anxiety management strategies. Information takes place continuously and it uses means of communication tailored to the beneficiaries' understanding, for example: images,

easy-to-read language, audio-video presentations, Braille language, nonverbal language, vocalizations, etc.

Discussions with beneficiaries' relatives only occurred by remote means (video conferences, phone calls, e-mails, social networks, etc.).

In residential centres, joint activities took place while maintaining the physical distance between participants (1.5-2 m), wearing facial masks and working with groups of up to 5 beneficiaries. In the centre courtyards, outdoor activities were recommended.

In day centres, activities were carried out through remote communication, including counselling, and social workers worked from home and adapted their work program according to the beneficiaries' availability.

A strategy identified by both social workers in residential and day centres was the establishment of communication groups through WhatsApp, which proved to be very useful, communication taking place promptly and helping solving certain situations faster than before the use of this means of communication. Social workers participating in the study said they would continue using this way of communication after the pandemic.

Another strategy for teamwork was conducting videoconferencing sessions, which are more frequent than during the face-to-face period. The arguments on the more frequent use of online sessions were linked to the need for intervision and faster resolution of some situations.

Last but not least, they mentioned the simplification of bureaucracy at interinstitutional level, in particular by transmitting documents in electronic format.

3.5. Perceptions of Social Workers on New Trends in Communication

Social workers participating in the study appreciated, in particular, the measures adopted in communicating with their colleagues, considering that they would continue using communication groups through WhatsApp after the pandemic. Also, the rapid adaptation of both their beneficiaries and their relatives, and of other social actors in the community or at national level to adapt to the diversity of remote communication.

One aspect considered only by social workers in residential centres was linked to the emotional connection with beneficiaries during the workplace isolation period, while, for social workers in day centres, it was a critical aspect.

Informal communication networks between specialists were appreciated both at organization and at interinstitutional level, being a constant means of professional support in order to solve some new situations with which they had not yet faced.

Critical aspects were appreciated as being related to the lack of external supervisions and training courses tailored to the needs identified by social workers (e.g., crisis management, stress management, and professional burnout, ICTs skills, mediation conflicts between beneficiaries, etc.)

Remote communication with other institutions and digitization of some procedures was appreciated as especially beneficial for the time gained with removing movements and the queuing for the submission of documents.

The ability to quickly adapt to changes, to be flexible, and positive attitude were appreciated by most social workers as factors that contributed to overcoming stressful situations.

4. Discussion

The present study focused on the identification of new trends in the communication of social workers specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. Result analysis revealed changes in the communication of social workers with beneficiaries, their relatives, colleagues and other social actors in the community or at national level, which is in line with the results of other literature studies. Social workers used remote communication replacing face-to-face communication with beneficiaries. (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020: 79; Miller & Lee, 2020: 567; Mishna *et al.*, 2020)

Communication with the participants was mainly maintained via telephone communication, written messages and, occasionally, through the WhatsApp video application, aspects revealed by Lightfoot & Moone (2020) and by Trancă (2021). By using telephone conversations, emotional connection was difficult. (Nisanci *et al.*, 2020: 687)

Results of this study and from literature highlight difficulties caused by the limited resources or weak ability to use online means of communication: nevertheless, social workers adapted quite quickly. (Gibson, Bardach & Pope, 2020: 671; Cabiati, 2021: 7; Trancă, 2021) Also, the use of protective equipment prevented communication with the beneficiaries, affecting the capacity of noting nonverbal indices. (Banks *et al.*, 2020: 572; Hung, Lee & Cheung, 2021: 2)

Interinstitutional communication through digitization and adoption of online working procedures was especially appreciated by social workers. “The digitization and computerization of working procedures are the most wonderful things that have happened.” (Dima, Schmitz & Şimon, 2021) The diversification of intercultural and interinstitutional means of communication was also highlighted by a Trancă (2021). Adaptation of communication and working strategies to online format with internship students was also highlighted by Baciu & Trancă (2021).

According to other researches, protecting the confidentiality of beneficiaries’ information through online communication was found difficult during the pandemic, an aspect highlighted by Mishna *et al.* (2020), Banks *et al.* (2020: 572), Hung, Lee & Cheung (2021: 2), Pascoe (2021: 2) and Trancă (2021).

5. Research Limitations

The limitations of this study are related to the reduced sample size: failing to study all social workers in residential and day centres in the western Romania suggests the need to be cautious while generalising.

Another limitation is the absence of the participation of beneficiaries to whom services were provided during the pandemic, which would be necessary to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in its entirety.

However, results are also supported by other studies in the literature carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Implications for Practice and Research

With the imposition of the state of emergency generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers adapted their communication very quickly, with changes in particular in the use of online means of communication. Adapting or changing working procedures in terms of communication with beneficiaries, partnerships, teammates or interinstitutional communication after the end of the pandemic period was taken into account by social workers participating in the study.

Research is needed on the impact of long-term use of communication with beneficiaries in exclusive online variants, especially on the component of clinical activity, as well as on social workers who need to provide social benefits or on social workers in rural municipalities.

7. Conclusions

Participants in this study identified a number of difficulties in communicating with beneficiaries, partners, colleagues or other social actors with which they interact in their professional activity; they described the strategies they adopted on overcoming these difficulties, appreciating critical aspects and defining what they will take over from the communication experience specific to the pandemic period in their future activities.

Pandemic situations will probably continue to transform the provision of social services and the communication trends of social workers and other specialists. In this context, “We must reflect, analyse, and learn from this crisis.” (O’Leary & Tsui, 2020: 274)

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