

## ***SOCIO-CULTURAL TRAITS OF THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF HELPERS***

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*Abstract: In this paper, we shall present the results of an empirical study performed among students attending Babeş-Bolyai University's Social Work Faculty in Cluj-Napoca and the Eszterházy Károly College's Social Pedagogy Faculty in Eger. The central question of the study is the extent to which caregiver (helper) students incorporate into their professional practice the values and health care practices of the local community in which they had grown up and gotten socialized.*

*Motivational background: we would like to call attention to the fact that the vocational self must incorporate the value system of the community in which the professional had been socialized and in which they operate. Recognizing this could increase professional success, especially in the case of caregiver professionals (in our case, social workers and social pedagogues).*

*We hypothesize that the underlying values of the community are being incorporated by the students to a small degree throughout developing their professional profile and vocational self. Our results show that 24.7% of the respondents do not make use of resources inherent in the community.*

***Keywords: professional identity, students, professional practice, motivational background***

### **Introductory remarks**

Degrees obtained in the course of formal training play the crucial role in the conventional definition of professional identity. When a work position is announced, it will primarily be the documents certifying graduation from a school that are analyzed when assessing suitability, and if these correspond to the profile of the position, only professional skill will be insisted upon, which is embodied by the years spent and functions attended to in different positions. From these data, it is of course possible to speculate on the professional profile of the person in question, as well as the nature of other formal or informal factors besides academic training that have shaped the development of the professional self, but we cannot obtain a full picture of the particulars of the person's professional socialization.

Beside formal education, the socio-cultural environment in which the professional operates, as well as their own community of origin as a background for socialization can play an important part in developing the retention of the professional role, the professional career and the integrated professional socialization. By way of this paper, we would like to call attention to the fact that the vocational self incorporates the value system of the community in which the professional had been socialized, and recognizing this can increase professional success, especially in the case of helpers.

### **Theoretical background**

Ethnographic and anthropological field studies performed at the beginning of the last century – prominent figures of which were Dimitrie Gusti (1880-1955), Petre Andrei (1891-1940) and Venczel József (1913-1972) – have not only called attention to the identity-defining role of the geographical and cultural environment, but also to the fact that community cohesion has an organizational role on an intra- and interpersonal level as well. It

became necessary to notice that in local societies, psychological representation, behavior, verbal and non-verbal communication, the control of norms and sanctions have unique forms of manifestation that affect the individual. In ethnically homogeneous communities, all of these exist as collective representations, and are embodied in the “cultural performance” of everyday life (Niedermüller 1989).

In the last third of the last century, there was a resurgence of ethnics-related research into local communities. Results of studies point to the fact that powers inherent in local societal groups genuinely function (Hunter, A. 1974, Sumner, W. G. 1978, Garfinkel 1984, van den Berghe 1981, Heritage 1984, S. Rokkan – D.W. Urwin 1984, Fife 2005, Gy. Jánosi 1986, P. Niedermüller 1989.), and if these are not taken into consideration during the analysis of the vocational self, we disregard important resources.

Harold Garfinkel (1984, quoted by Giddens 2003) has developed so-called ethnomethodology, which essentially examines interpreted behavior or communication in a societal context. According to Adams (2012), “Ethnographic methods fall into the broader category of qualitative methodologies and are aimed at understanding cultural practices, human beliefs and behaviors, and sociocultural changes over time” (Adams 2012, 339).

The work of Garfinkel (quoted by Giddens 2003) – despite the fact that it pertains to methods of interpreting everyday acts of communication – shows a path to discovering “folk” values, and encourages us to regard societal context as a factor which shapes professional identity in helper vocations.

New inter-disciplines have appeared in the wake of ethno-studies. From among these, I would like to point out ethnopsyoanalysis (ethno-psychiatry), not only because György Dobó – who has become well-known under the name George(s) Devereux –, born in the Banat region in Romania, was its creator, but because “its theoretical and methodological consequences may have an enlightening significance not only for smaller areas of expertise but for social sciences in general” (Erős 2008, 3.).

Based on the perceptual foundations of ethnopsyoanalysis, we believe that helper work can also be approached in an ethnopsychological dimension as well. The environment in which their personality has developed been shaped is important from the standpoint of both the helper professional – whose value system comprises the effects of their original community – as well as that of the client. We could broach new horizons in discovering the causes of behavioral deviations, and later on in treatments as well if we analyze the client within the system of healing traditions characteristic of their own cultural group. Jozef Vyrost and Alena Zelova (1988) define ethno-psychology as the middle discipline of “ethnically determined and psychologically regulated behavior” which examines and assesses the psychological and sociological traits of ethnic communities such as behavior, “establishing contact, verbal manifestations, self-assessment, value scales of values, prejudices, stereotypes [...]” (Vyrost and Zelova 1988, quoted by Somos 1990, 1.). Ethno-sociology examines the contents of folk culture and folk sources in order to highlight social phenomena. During our research, we have endeavored to reveal “folk and communal sources” which, if recognized, could make the work of the helper more efficient.

### **Our research concerning the professional identity of helpers**

## **2.1. Preemptive research and the timeliness of the present study**

During a previous study (Albert-Lőrincz and Albert-Lőrincz 2009), we have come to the realization that it is vital values (the desire for a problem-free, pleasant, healthy and joyful life) that have a guiding role in the motivational structure of graduate helper students and helpers at the beginning of their career. Needs are directed more towards the outside world (adequate environment, the need for good ambiance, recognition, usefulness and freedom). The sense of abandonment, of respect and that of an inferiority complex are what define social acclimatization and the adoption of the professional role. The factors brought to light reveal that the helpers examined are fairly defenseless before their environment, since the fulfillment of their above-mentioned needs depends on mostly exterior factors and the social environment. Inner resources and rounding out their personality using internal efforts are left in the background.

In another one of our studies (Albert-Lőrincz E. et al., 2004), we have found that it is difficult for teachers at the beginning of their careers to bear the high expectations they are faced with; they feel this is overwhelming. Among these expectations, we find the burden of time, creating school morale, conforming to requirements, managing behavior issues, managing the organizational issues of education as well as that of school life. In this case, too, acclimatization is fraught with tension.

The studies mentioned above signal the difficulties with professional acclimatization as well as the need for a paradigm shift with regard to the career building and professional integration processes of helper professionals. The first step of this process would be for the caregiver to examine and become aware of the elements of their own identity, because these are important parts of the professional self. Professional identity is determined by motivation, goals, needs, the emotions connected to practicing the profession, and cognition. All of these develop in the spirit of local communities, and can be defined as the aspect of personality development that shows how a person expresses themselves and becomes accomplished through their profession as a member of a given community. The conscious facilitation of professional socialization is especially important in the case of professionals where their own personality serves as a working tool. Endowing their personalities with resources suggests itself as necessary for them. From among resources, we will emphasize the role of community resources in our current research.

The study analyzed in this paper was performed between October 1, 2013 and February 28, 2014. The focus of our interest is the examination of the developing professional identity. The study was performed in two locations: the Babeş-Bolyai University's Sociology and Social Work Faculty in Cluj-Napoca as well as the Eszterházy Károly College's Teacher Training and Knowledge Technology Faculty in Eger. We have included graduate students in the inquest.

We have used two types of methods during the study: a traditional survey by questionnaire suited to quantitative analysis, which we have supplemented by a projective technique (asking for symbols).

All graduating students who were in training had participated in the survey, 85 persons in all; 32.9% study at the Cluj-Napoca Social Work specialization, while 67.1% study at the Eger Social Pedagogy specialization. 83.5% of participants were female, 15.3% were male,

and 1.2% (N=1) did not answer. Of these, 25% from Cluj-Napoca were male, 75% female; 89.48% from Eger were female and 10.52% were male. In both departments, the proportion of genders was strongly biased towards females. 5.88% of respondents are married, 3.53% live in domestic partnerships, 43.53% live in relationships, 45.88% are single, and 1.16% did not answer this question. Married and single persons all came from the Cluj-Napoca sample. Relationships are more characteristic in the Eger sample. 75.3 of respondents are only studying, 4.71% work under an indeterminate length employment contract in addition to studying, 2.35% work under a fixed-term employment contract in addition to attending university, 1.18% work as executives in their profession despite their student status, another 1.18% are independent entrepreneurs, 3.53% indicated the response *other* (e.g., seasonal work) and 9.41% did not answer this question. It can be seen that among Cluj-Napoca students, working in addition to studying is more common than in the case of Eger students.

## **2.2. The traits of professional identity and those of the relationship towards the profession**

With the help of the questionnaire, we have examined *the extent to which they were content with their chosen course of life* based on the experience gained during practicing the profession and what they judge their career models to be like. The justification of the question is supported by the fact that serious practical training takes place at both universities, and within this, they place much emphasis on working with clients, so that students can experience as early as their university years to what extent they can manage in their chosen profession, and they can form an opinion about how they experience their vocation.

By comparing the answers given to the questions, we have managed to highlight the satisfaction with profession and career. We shall only address here the questions that have shown significant differences between the two samples. We were surprised by the fact that career satisfaction is much higher in Cluj-Napoca students. With regard to the elements of career satisfaction, we have obtained the following significance indexes: satisfaction with the professional and content part of the work ( $p=0.043$ ); satisfaction with the personal circumstances of the work ( $p=0.049$ ); in the relationship with colleagues ( $p=0.023$ ); with the mood specific to the community of employees ( $p=0.012$ ); with the fulfillment of promises made when the position was advertised ( $p=0.019$ ); as well as the extent to which work can be reconciled with having children ( $p=0.037$ ). More investigation is needed to clear up these differences, because we hypothesize that they are more indicative of the graduates' attitude than the objective situation and the actual circumstances of the work. (If an outside observer were to take a visit to social institutions belonging to the districts of Eger and Cluj-Napoca, these opinions would not seem justified to them). We also know that there is no significant difference between Eger and Cluj-Napoca in assessing preparation; students in Eger are more content with the basic training they receive, but Cluj-Napoca students produced higher values with regard to the disposition towards life, the sense of perspective, the satisfaction with life, i.e., they are more content. We hypothesize that higher career satisfaction is connected to these positive emotions and the outlook on life.

To the question, *what sorts of difficulties do you perceive* currently with regard to career choice, they answered the following (in order of frequency): low wages, finding a position,

the low recognition of the profession, great responsibility, high exertion, time pressure, tasks additional to the responsibilities entailed by the position. Misgivings about the future on the part of the populations from both countries are equivalent.

We have used a qualitative method, *symbol analysis*, in order to analyze professional identity. We believe that experiencing the profession expressed in symbols is better at revealing the cognitive and affective elements of the attitude towards the profession. This conception is supported by Jacobi's (1999) research. In her opinion, grasping ideas with the aid of symbols offers an added benefit compared to the rational formulation of the attitude, since "the symbol is a sort of mediator between the incompatibilities of conscious and unconscious, the hidden and the manifest, and it is never exclusively abstract or concrete, real or unreal, rational or irrational. It is always both, since it belongs to the transient realm of subtle reality, which in itself has expressive power" (Jacobi 1999). The justification of using symbol analysis is that learning the profession – and later practicing it as well – is followed by a process which is realized in images as well, which help in assuming a role and in understanding the roles, expectations and behavior of others as well. The basis for the role of professional is a representation that comprises units of experience and happenings condensed into images. These always carry within themselves the specific traits of the local community where the person lives. We hypothesize that there could be a difference between the answers of the students from Eger and Cluj-Napoca.

We have asked graduate students to find a symbol which encompasses all that this profession means to them based on their disposition towards their profession (what they know about it and the way they experienced in the fieldwork they had done so far), and to justify their choices.

We analyzed the symbols and justifications received from several angles: actual meaning, emotional content, direction (timescales for work-client-self), dynamics (static, dynamic), level of involvement, level of abstraction (proximity-remoteness), etc.

Of the symbols most used by the Eger students, the top three are "smile", "heart" and "sun". Of the symbols used by the Cluj-Napoca students, the foremost are "hand", "love" and "smile". Those from Eger describe the profession more with gestures and elements from nature, while those from Transylvania use more symbols that refer to interaction, are more dynamic and have a deeper emotional content. This attitude could indicate the emotional state of the students, and could also be linked to their outlooks on life and their sense of perspective. In the case of the Transylvanian students, it can be assumed that the dynamics of the images and the attitude that suggests activity is due to a higher level of satisfaction. What poses danger in both samples is the strong emotional content of the symbols and the high level of idealization. These could lead to accelerated emotional burnout and possibly abandoned careers.

We can conclude that in both samples, the professional self must be consciously cultivated, the need for development must be strengthened and the level of training must be increased so that the challenges of the field do not cause disappointment to young helpers or that they are not dissuaded from their careers, also ensuring that our graduates will not be without means when faced with the difficulties anticipated. This can be assisted by deep involvement in and connection with the community.

### 2.3. Community values as resources for the helper

We had not assumed too much awareness with regard to recognizing the personality-shaping effects of the community, but we also had not anticipated the great extent of the shortcomings in this area. To the question, *do you use the traditions of protecting health in the community where you work?* –, 47.1% of respondents did not give an answer. In a later stage of the study, in focus groups, we asked what the reason was for the frequent non-answer. They answered that they did not quite understand the question and did not know what to think with regard to the traditions of protecting health in the community. We were surprised that it was unclear for the graduates what traditions they could incorporate into their work with clients. 28.2% said that they make use of community values and consider the mindset, customs and religion of the local community in question. 50% of the Cluj-Napoca sample and 17.5% of the Eger sample utilize the health protection traditions of the community in which they work. There is significant difference between the two samples in this respect. On average, 24.7% of respondents do not avail themselves of utilizing community resources, 21.4% of Cluj-Napoca and 26.3% of Eger students in helper training.

We were also interested in the extent to which graduate students are aware of the fact that their personality, if viewed as a tool in their work, carries professional resources. The question was, *"Did you bring any customs or values with you from the community where you grew up that could serve as a resource in your work?"* In this case, the responses were more reassuring: 58.3% answered "yes", 15.5% answered "no", and the rate of those not answering was 26.2%. We believe that during training, special care must be taken in order for students to become aware of their roots, so that the values they had absorbed in early socialization are not lost, that the value system they brought with them is a living reality, and that they use this as a resource, all the while respecting the customs and values of the client. The subsequent distribution of the answers is as follows: 75% of the Transylvanians answered "yes", while only half of the Hungarians did so; the rate of negative answers is 15.5%, and in this there is no significant difference between the two populations (Cluj-Napoca 17.9%, Eger 14.3%). To the question, *"To what extent do the values and customs of the community where you currently do fieldwork correspond to those of where you grew up?"*, the following categories of answers developed: "they correspond in certain aspects", 8.3%, "they correspond", 27.4%, "they do not correspond", 15.5%, and no answer from 48.8%.

**To what extent do the values and customs of the community where you currently do fieldwork correspond to those of where you grew up?**

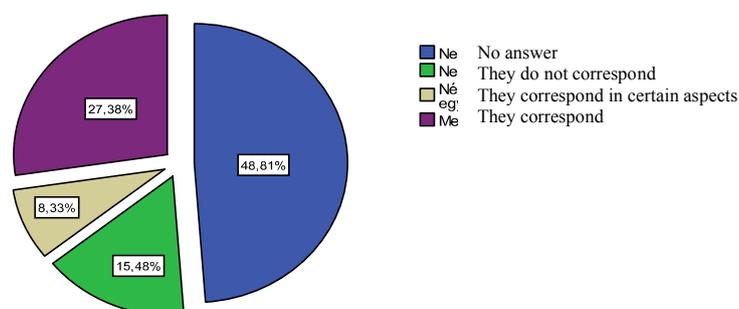


Fig. 2. *The correspondence between the customs and value scales of the place of origin and the current work environment (where they do their fieldwork) of helpers*

32.1% of non-responders (48.8% of the sample) are from Cluj-Napoca and 57.1% are from Eger. Calculated to the whole of the sample, the customs of the place of birth and those of the community where they currently live do not correspond in 15.5% of the cases. In this instance, there is no significant difference between the two samples. In the case of correspondence, the proportion of those from Cluj-Napoca is significantly higher (46.4%) compared to those from Eger (17.9%).

Examples for differences: “value judgments are different in the community of origin”; “the lifestyle and the cycle of life are different”; “the two communities differ in their schedules”; “my family has less of a social attitude”; “people at home are more conservative and not so accepting and helpful”; “home is a smaller, more close community, where everybody pays much more attention to each other, everyone greets each other”; “in my current community, people keep in touch via the Internet, relationships are more relaxed, people do not go to church, they swear, they are more aggressive”; etc.

Similarities: “learning and morality is important”; “searching for the meaning of life in faith”; “helpfulness, they help each other”; “they neglect the will of the community”; “the generation gap: today’s 18-year-olds are more worldly, more apathetic, they do not communicate, they have become disillusioned with solving day-to-day problems, they are prone to depression, dysfunctional behavior is common within the family”; “during fieldwork, they pay attention to me, they support me, we work alongside just like at home”; “I work with the elderly, they subscribe to the same values as my grandparents”; “children are important, there is a correspondence in the principles of life: the weak must be helped, important values when caring for the disabled are love, appreciation, care, protecting, helping and being fond of the individual”; “the most important is the love of and the trust in God”.

Experience shows that after finishing university training, many will not go on to work in their birthplaces. We believed it was justified to ask, “*Are there any advantages in a helper professional working in the community they grew up in?*” In this question, the opinions of the students from both university centers are very similar. The distribution of answers is: no answer from 14.8%, “yes” from 48.1%, “no” from 16.0% and “yes and no” from 21.0%.

In order to better understand the feelings of the two populations examined towards the profession, we also asked with what target groups they had come into contact during their fieldwork. The next figure illustrates the overall picture pertaining to the total population.

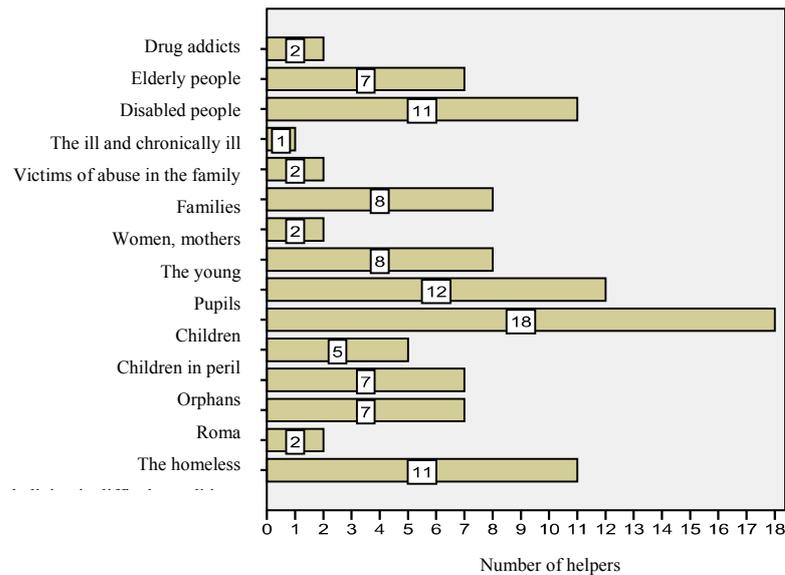


Fig. 3. *The target groups of fieldwork*

In both study locations, the students worked mostly with children and those living in difficult conditions, as well as disabled persons; thus, they formed their opinions presented in the study based on this context.

In the following, we were interested how they experience their own living conditions.

#### *Overall assessment:*

The main goal of the study was to compare the idiosyncrasies in the identities of Cluj-Napoca and Eger students undergoing helper training and to examine the extent to which community value systems and customs are present on an emotional-motivational level in the professional self. It is our conviction that the development of the professional self is influenced by the resources inherent in local communities. The value reserves of the community social and cultural milieu supplement the development of personality, and significantly influence the professional profile and professional self-expression of the helper professional.

In our research, we have found that:

- the professional identity of Hungarian and Transylvanian helper professionals as well as their attitude towards the profession have unique defining traits;
- students preparing for the profession of helper are not sufficiently aware of the fact that the community in which they have been socialized has implanted values into their personality; they do not recognize that the community values they carry may be used as resources in their work as helpers; and at the same time, they can and should rely on the resources of the community they work in.

The conscious facilitation of professional socialization is especially important in professions where one's own personality serves as a working tool. The development of professional identity cannot be regarded as a spontaneous process; the future caregiver professionals must be made aware of its taking shape/molding. The first step of the process

would be for the caregiver to examine and become aware of the elements of their own identity as well as those of the community, because these are important parts of the professional self.

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