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PRINCIPLES, RULES, DIFFICULTIES AND DILEMMAS  
OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE SOCIAL WORK

Abstract

The article presents the selected principles of interpersonal communication in social work, paying attention to communication rules referring to active listening, choosing the right questions, or adapting the language to the interlocutor. The authors devoted a special place to communication awareness and the look at interpersonal communication as a meeting with an individual, a unique and exceptional person. In addition to the selected communication principles, the authors have also presented the selected dilemmas and communication difficulties that determine the quality of the conversation, its course and effects.

**Keywords:** interpersonal communication, social work, communication awareness, listening

DYLEMATY, TRUDNOŚCI I ZASADY KOMUNIKACJI INTERPERSONALNEJ  
W SFERZE PRACY SOCJALNEJ

Abstrakt

W artykule przedstawiono wybrane zasady komunikacji interpersonalnej obowiązujące w pracy socjalnej, zwrócono uwagę na reguły komunikacyjne odnoszące się do aktywnego słuchania, wyboru odpowiednich pytań czy dostosowania języka do rozmówcy. Szczególne miejsce

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autorki poświęciły świadomości komunikacyjnej oraz spojrzeniu na komunikację interpersonalną jako na spotkanie z indywidualnością, osobą wyjątkową i niepowtarzalną. Obok wybranych zasad komunikacyjnych autorki przedstawiły również wybrane dylematy i trudności komunikacyjne, które determinują jakość rozmowy, jej przebieg i skutki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunikacja interpersonalna, praca socjalna, świadomość komunikacyjna, słuchanie

## INTRODUCTION

A social worker in the practice of his/her professional life carries out many important and difficult tasks by performing the function of an adviser, teacher, mediator and negotiator. Each of these roles requires a social worker to use a variety of communication tools and skills that allow creating the atmosphere of trust and security. A social worker as a representative of the community “encourages and gives a sense of security. S/he makes the hospitalization patients feel full-fledged members of society. This way, help becomes solidarity, and solidarity is closely related to sensitivity” (Kucharska 2015, 96). This sensitivity, creating understanding, comprehension, a sense of bonding, acceptance and security is based on the communication process, which principles and their observance are determined by the quality of the social worker – customer relationships, but also the customer – customer’s family relations, a person seeking help – a person outside the family. The importance of communication skills and the efficient use of communication tools is visible not only at the level of helping a person in need of support and understanding, but also in the aspect of building a bridge between such a person and his/her relatives – family, the closer and further surroundings. A social worker can, for example, explain the rules of communication between the patient and his/her family” (Kucharska 2015, 97), and thus “help the dying and the family in communication in the atmosphere of death” (Kucharska 2015, 97) and disease.

Therefore, on the one hand, communication is used to build a person seeking help – social worker relationship, and on the other hand, the social worker acts as a teacher who teaches how the people in need should communicate with the environment in crisis situations, and indicates the communication path that should be followed by relatives of people in need, the sick, to give them support and understanding. Considering the importance of communicative competences on which help for the people in need and their families is based, it is worth paying attention to the basic principles as well as communication dilemmas characteristic of the process of social assistance and work. The aim of the article is to present basic principles and communication dilemmas in the aspect of interpersonal communication, the qualitative dimension of which serves to create relationships, show understanding, support and empathy.

## 1. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL WORK

Direct communication – interpersonal communication is the basic form of communication in the sphere of social work. “Ordinary” conversation can bring “extraordinary” results and be an “extraordinary” source of help for those in need, for people in difficult life situations, and also support their relatives. This communication based both on the word and non-verbal behaviour allows, on the one hand, to provide the people in need with relevant information, knowledge, support, understanding or empathy. Therefore, it should be considered as a tool for social workers in the sphere of helping the ones in need, in the sphere of building a bridge of understanding, but also as a tool to understand the situation, in which the given person has found himself/herself. On the other hand, it should be remembered that a social worker also becomes a teacher who shows the relatives how to communicate with a person in need of help. S/he teaches customers how to communicate with the environment. In this aspect, communication becomes a challenge, because teaching others the communication rules is not easy and simple. Individual communication styles, emotions, health or cultural differences should be taken into account, which often “disorganize work, give rise to conflicts, and cause prejudice” (Bielecka 2017, 161). All of the factors mentioned above determine the quality of communication, affecting its effectiveness and efficiency.

Considering the above, one should agree with the statement that “in order for the social worker to be able to communicate well with the supported person, knowledge in the field of communication psychology turns out to be useful” (Długi 2012, 54), which also becomes useful in the face of the teacher’s role – which is played by a social worker, for example, teaching the family to communicate with a sick or dying family member.

Of course, interpersonal communication is a challenge in helping people who are in crisis. It should be remembered that although communication rules facilitate efficient exchange of information, it is necessary to take into account issues concerning the individuality, uniqueness and distinctiveness of each interlocutor. As observed by M. Jurewicz, “individuality of man is the result of the clash of social situations, roles, patterns, expectations, collectivity with the personal choice and involvement of the person in it. This is always a specific, personal reaction of the individual to situations, problems and social experiences” (Jurewicz 2016, 14). Each person is different, has his/her own unique style of communication, own communication experiences that determine the current and present way of communicating with the environment. It should also be remembered that customers expect different types of help. It is important for the interpersonal communication to be a tool for a social worker to effectively and accurately assess these needs and expectations of the recipients of help. As noted by B. Długi, “it is important that customers receive what they need and now what we can offer them at the moment. Sometimes the client needs to be heard or has the need to «talk

it out», and we offer financial help because it falls within the criteria and we have the resources. Such actions usually result from a disturbed relationship between the client and a social worker who often works under time pressure. Here, the relationship was not established, the actual needs of the client «were not read» well, so s/he has no chance to change his/her situation” (Długi 2012, 58).

Considering the above issues, we should consider the problems, dilemmas and communication difficulties that social workers have to deal with in their work more deeply.

## 2. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION – DILEMMAS, PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

The tasks performed by social workers are often associated with making difficult decisions, achieving goals under stressful conditions, dealing with conflicts, misunderstandings and dilemmas. “The profession of a social worker is a typical «profession of the middle», in the very centre of various dilemmas. One can talk about a widely understood conflict of interests, opinions, perspectives and positions in the area of service provision” (Bieńko 2012, 97).

In the context of communication, one can talk about certain dilemmas and difficulties associated with the use of specific means or communication tools to help and support people in need. What tools will be appropriate, what form of communication should be chosen for specific interlocutors and specific communication situations? Social workers have to answer these questions.

However, these questions are not easy, because the answer to these types of questions may depend on the quality of the customer relationship being built, the atmosphere of the conversation being built, the amount of information obtained and the help measures adapted to them. Strong emotions, stress, fatigue, time pressure constitute another obstacles in the sphere of communication with clients. Putting too much focus on speaking, presenting your reasons, point of view, decisions, ideas to solve the problem may be the difficulty in communication instead of careful listening, making efforts to understand the other party’s point of view on a given problem. The lack of reaction to what the client says or the wrong interpretation of his/her words and the incorrect feedback make it difficult to understand each other and reach an agreement, as well as to adjust the right types of help to the client’s needs. In a situation where each of the parties tries to present their reasons, not caring what the other side wants to convey, a communication situation arises, which can be called parallel, which consists in “that every communicator tries to force his/her own thought or vision at any price, not responding to what the other person is saying or experiencing. The other one, in turn, does the same, trying to convince the first one to his/her own reasons, not responding to his/her arguments. Then we deal with the so-called parallel communication, but against each other. It is a situation in which both partners communicate according to one’s own plan, own vision, not paying attention to what the other person is saying.

This type of communication can take a long time and eventually lead to a sharp conflict when one of the parties realizes that the other person does not listen to him/her at all” (Miąso 2016, 270). Adjusting the course of the conversation to the previously developed course of the conversation, establishing a specific vision of conversation with clients, without paying attention to the fact that each person is different and each conversation may be different, may lead to the lack of effective communication, misunderstandings and mistakes in the assessment of the problem. Of course, the adopted scheme and vision of conversations with clients may be helpful, however, it should be remembered that in the qualitative terms of interpersonal communication – and this is how one should look at the process of communicating with clients in social work – every interlocutor is unique, an individual, and meeting with him/her can bring new communication experiences, be considered also in the light of communication lessons – acquiring new knowledge and information. Interpersonal communication is, after all, a two-way process – so when transmitting information, the sender becomes the recipient of messages that can help him/her understand the other person, his/her situation and problem, but also help in adapting the appropriate communication tools and means of assistance, which are expected by the person seeking support. “It is important that customers receive what they need and not what we can offer them at the moment. Sometimes the client needs to be heard or has a need to «talk it out», and we offer financial help because it falls within the criteria and we have the means” (Długi 2012, 58). Interpersonal communication should therefore be treated as a tool that when properly and appropriately used allows to accurately assess the needs of customers and adjust the form of help to their expectations.

When considering the issues regarding communication difficulties and dilemmas, it is worth emphasizing the importance of some feedback, such as showing support or empathy. In the sphere of empathy, compassion, striving to understand the client and identify with his feelings and situation, one can speak about a specific dilemma faced by a social worker. On the one hand, in order to talk about helping another person, attention should be paid to empathy, but on the other hand, it should be remembered that too strong emotional involvement in a specific situation, in which the client found himself/herself is not helpful and beneficial. As the paradoxes of professional action, M. Szpunar includes emotional commitment to solving problems. “The difference of these exposures is a natural consequence of the fact that one of the parties is the subject of the aid activity, concerns it and struggles with the problems being the subject of the action” (Szpunar 2010, 64). The author refers own considerations to the tasks performed by family assistants, noting that in their work “multi-problem families, as the name suggests, are entangled in emotionally difficult life situations, which often cause suffering of individuals. In these situations, the assistant on the one hand, emphatically approaches to accompany the family, on the other hand, s/he cannot, or even should not level this commitment with the emotions of people directly

affected by this. Such an entry into the biography of families enforces a holistic view of the client's life, but it will never be balanced with the experience directly experienced by the person interested, entangled in the problems" (Szpunar 2010, 64) It is impossible to fully accept the other's point of view on the problem and conflict situation in the communication process, because we are never able to "get out of ourselves" and fully "impersonate" another person. We will never get to know all her/his communication experiences, deeply hidden needs, feelings, expectations, etc. We can try to understand the other person, get to know him/her the best we can, but we will never know him/her 100 percent and it is undoubtedly worth remembering.

It is of course an important issue how a social worker engages in a relationship built with the client. Empathy, attentive listening, communicative openness are important components of effective interpersonal communication that serve to build understanding, comprehension, closeness and trust. However, the issues of engagement and distance are important communication dilemmas in social work. It seems legitimate to find a golden measure to maintain a proper distance to the problems of clients and their families. As M. Bieńko rightly observes, "on the interpersonal level, dilemmas concern the determination of the boundaries of the relationship space, and thus the clash of commitment and distance in contact with the client" (Bieńko 2012, 98).

Of course, the dilemmas characteristic of social work are definitely more. They may refer not only to issues related to emotional involvement, compassion and empathy, but also to "choosing the lesser evil, making conflict between law, norm, policy and the goal of therapy, choice – care vs. control – between the well-being of the client and the well-being of the institution, in which we are employed or with which we cooperate; dilemmas also concern disproportions of power and knowledge between a social worker and a client" (Długi 2012, 56). Time pressure, stress, difficulty and complexity of the decision-making process are factors that make it difficult to deal with these dilemmas. In the field of interpersonal communication, it is worth emphasizing that its proper course can be facilitated by coping with problems and dilemmas, and thus serve to achieve the intended goals. Therefore, it is worth paying attention to the issues concerning the principles and rules of effective interpersonal communication, which is an important challenge in the work of social workers.

### 3. PRINCIPLES AND RULES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL WORK

When considering interpersonal communication from the perspective of communication principles and rules, it is worth to first emphasize one of the most important principles of interpersonal communication, which concerns looking at each communication situation and at each interlocutor as an individual, a unique person, a conversation that can neither be undone nor repeated. This uniqueness

of conversations and interlocutors means that each subsequent meeting with the client is not treated as a routine conversation, but as a challenge and a key to understanding people. A social worker does not “enter” into a conversation with a ready assessment of the situation, but creates it on the received information, and uses the feedback as a tool to broaden knowledge on a specific topic. Of course, it should be remembered that the pressure of time can cause that the conversation does not proceed in a way that maximizes communication openness. In addition, the next struggle is, of course, the degree of difficulty of conversations with both the client and his relatives. Often, the topics discussed are difficult, painful, and sensitive, and the observations of the client’s situation and behaviour cause that messages that the social worker should pass on to his/her interlocutor may encounter resistance, opposition, anger and frustration.

However, regardless of the complexity of problems faced by customers, the difficulties of the topics discussed, it is worth remembering the above principles. It can protect the interlocutor from an inappropriate assessment to a given situation or an inappropriate matching of communication tools and forms of support and assistance.

Another principle on which the conversation with the client should be based in the careful and empathic listening, which on the one hand allows gathering the necessary information, and on the other hand allow the social worker to build the right atmosphere of conversation – an atmosphere of trust, credibility, security, understanding and respect. Therefore, listening in not only for gathering information, but for communicating the information to the interlocutor indicating that the listener is interested in the subject of conversation, is focused on understanding, support and help. As I. Podobas rightly notes, listening can “create a sense of support and encourage greater openness, confronting all problems – which may make our interlocutor aware of the source of his/her difficulties. Active listening helps to thoroughly analyse and construct the interlocutor’s statements, which increases his chances of solving the problem. It also allows to freely express oneself on a given topic, “throwing a given problem out”, thus reducing psychological tension” (Podobas 2014, 23).

An equally important principle of interpersonal communication is the use of questions. In communication practice, a social worker can use a variety of questions that allow the implementation of various goals. Questions not only serve to acquire new information, to deepen knowledge on a given topic. Properly asked questions allow reflection and looking at a given problem from a different perspective, opening to new solutions. Under the influence of these types of questions, the customer can look at the problem from a different perspective, see what was previously not visible.

Therefore, it is worth remembering that some communication activities, such as listening or asking questions, although they are primarily associated with acquiring information, often also serve to share it, allow you to look at the problem from a different perspective, making it easier to reach an agreement.

When considering issues regarding the principles of effective interpersonal communication, it is also important to emphasize the importance of the principle related to communication awareness. A social worker who wants to use communication tools to achieve his/her goals, help those in need, should pay attention to the conscious use of the available means and forms of communication. Communication awareness means that the sender in a thoughtful and responsible manner uses specific words and non-verbal behaviours, realizing the effects that messages sent by him/her can bring. Reactions of a verbal and non-verbal nature may in fact determine the course of a conversation, its length or subject matter.

The above-mentioned interpersonal communication rules do not exhaust the subject, because communication rules can also include the use of a language of respect, or the use of a language intelligible to the interlocutor. However, the principles described above are the basis for effective interpersonal communication, providing a signpost for the interlocutors indicating how the course of the conversation depends on communication skills, experience, knowledge, attitude to the interlocutor of each party.

#### SUMMARY

The activities of a social worker are largely based on the efficient and proper use of communication tools. Communication skills, efficient use of feedback, listening, asking questions, paying attention to issues related to the language used, attitude to the interlocutor, well-being or physical health, determine the relationships built with the client and his/her relatives. As B. Długi notes, “the characteristics of a person helping, such as: the way of conducting a conversation and expressing oneself, personality, temperament, attitude towards the client and our attitude towards him/her, can disrupt our relationship with the client so much that not only the substantial presentation of the problem and its cognition will be hindered, but the introduction of the expected change for the improvement of the client’s situation will also be disturbed” (Długi 2012, 53). Therefore, it should be remembered that the responsibility for the result of the conversation rests largely on the social worker, who should consciously use the available tools and means of communication, in order to properly adapt the specific form of assistance to a specific client. Therefore, it seems that communication awareness is a key communication principle on which a conversation with the client should be based. This awareness allows to adjust the language and non-verbal behaviours to a specific communication situation in a suitable way, as well as to predict the possible effects of specific communication behaviours.



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