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THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE VIOLATION OF BOUNDARIES BETWEEN A CONSULTANT AND A CLIENT

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ABSTRACT: *In the article, the authors focus on the research findings obtained from social consultants (based on their own advisory experience) on the subject: the consequences of the violation of boundaries between a consultant and a client. In more specific division: theoretical definition of basic terms, types of violations of relationships between a client and a consultant, impact of the stated violations on the work of a consultant, the procedures (solution) of a consultant for already existing violations of the relationship, realizing of the relationship violation on the side of a consultant as well as on the side of a client.*

KEY WORDS: *advice, violation of boundaries, the relationship – a consultant and a client*

INTRODUCTION

Currently, people more and more often seek an advisor in a social or psychosocial field. It can be related to the social system of the state and its malfunctions, the living standard of its inhabitants, but also to insecurity, diseases, confusion and the loss of meaning in life in all age groups.

Gabura et al. (2002) draws an attention to particular risks that can occur not only during the mentioned crises, when he demonstrates that the term "advice" comes from the term "to advise", which can lead a client to the idea of an omnipotent consultant, who will solve their problems without the client's effort or loss of time. *"The concept of omniscient and omnipotent consultants is appealing to clients and social consultants, however it is not embedded in reality"* (Gabura et al., 2002, p. 7). Therefore, one of the main roles of social consultants, besides the help to a client, is to motivate a client to solve the problem situation responsibly and independently, and to be their catalyst and guide in managing their set tasks as well as any negative circumstances.

Social advice is the process based on a stable guidance relationship between a social consultant and a client. Within a guidance process, different methods, techniques and forms of advice are used, that focus on the solution of client's social problems and on improving their quality of life. This is carried out through knowledge, mobilization and development of the external and internal potential of a client.

The main purpose of social advice can be defined as help aimed at a client in order to decide and act in an efficient, meaningful, socially desirable way, which also helps them to develop personally and to improve their life on a bio-psycho-social level (Slovák, 2007 and Gabura, 2005).

The most significant part of the advice process is the relationship of a social consultant and a client in its different intensity, which depends on the level of the given advice, the type of problem, the type of a client, and a consultant as a professional as well as a human.

The creation of a relationship between a social consultant and a client is a significant factor of the process and effect of the advice. The important element in the creation of the relationship is setting the terms of cooperation, definition of the dealt with problem as well as the client's expectations of the social consultant. It is essential that, from the very beginning,

the relationship has not only working (so-called work alliance) but also interpersonal nature. Dryden (2008, p. 44) states that clients must be informed and must consent to:

- the advice approach used by a consultant,
- the practical questions of the advice,
- secrecy during and after the advice process (with the exceptions given by the law).

"A social consultant and a client should have their own space, mutual willingness to cooperate, mutual understanding and respect, patience, shared responsibility, and should aim at human engagement. Despite the mutual cooperation, the relationship a consultant – a client is not always a permanent romantic idyll, in some cases there might occasionally appear disappointment, dissatisfaction, confrontation or lack of trust. A part of the consultant's professional capability is the ability to handle these situations and use them in consulting work for the benefit of their client" (Gabura 2013, p. 214).

The whole system in the society and in the nature is based on specific conditions and boundaries, which results in the absence of chaos and in the creation of certain "order". Likewise, interpersonal relationships are formed by certain boundaries that can also be seen in helping professions in the relationship a consultant – a client. Here the boundaries make for the professional nature of the relationship with the aim to prevent the client or the consultant from being abused in the course of their cooperation. *"Relationship boundaries include the definition of roles, meeting conditions, supplying the information about people, their private life and other circumstances. They help to create the feeling of safety, consistency, security and clarity"* Čerešník (2012, p. 35 – 36).

In the context of the boundaries of an advice relationship, these boundaries may be violated by a social consultant as well as by a client. In practice it means the need for distinguishing the professional roles; if the boundaries were not clearly stated, it would have destructive consequences on the relationship of the consultant and the client, their work alliance and thus the final effect of the advice (Reamer In Levická et al., 2007). Different situations may arise, which are influenced by the problems with boundaries such as the vagueness of the boundaries, their interference or violation.

Žilová et al. (2010, p. 31) describes the violation on the side of a client as "such behaviour towards a social worker, by which the client intends, knowingly or accidentally, to disturb the communication and formation of the relationship between them and a social worker". On defining the violation of the boundaries by a client we believe that we can draw on the behaviour of particular types of a client. When defining the violation of the boundaries in the relationship a consultant – a client, however, we will only pay more attention to the violations by a social advisor since we believe that a consultant as a professional possesses the ability to reveal the violation of the boundaries in a relationship sooner than a client themselves, thus avoiding it, eliminating it or choosing the right way to note a client and to set mutual boundaries for an efficient cooperation. A social consultant should avoid violating the boundaries in the relationship with their client in the course of the consulting, which is also the part of their professional credit and work ethic.

One of the most common mistakes is an **excessive help of a consultant** when they are trying to solve everything on their own. A client is thus deprived of the possibility to cope with the burden in the current as well as the future situation. They can also be deprived of the feeling of their own ability to manage the situation. **Blending** is the situation when a social worker takes the client's problems for their own problems. In avoiding this violation in a consulting process, it is essential to distinguish between empathy and sympathy. **Sacrificing for a client** does not respect their autonomy and makes them a non-independent being. **Foreclosure of the boundaries** is not a positive phenomenon, too, which can more often be found on the side of a client. When occurring on the side of a social consultant, it is characterized by a cold approach and resistance to their client. Kopřiva (2006) adds further forms of the violation of the boundaries on the side of a consultant as tendencies, such as **broadening of their own boundaries** that is distinguished by extensive engagement of a social consultant, when they try to help their client too much, thus broadening the boundaries of their own personality on the client. It is the situation when a consultant compensates their own lack of self-confidence and loneliness for organizing the client's life. **An inappropriate control** over a client is reflected in not respecting the autonomy of a client. A client is not respected, cannot comment on the problem, and therefore, their rights are violated. **Out-of-duty approach**

can be seen with those social consultants who do not carry out their work in their own personal interest nor deep conviction but only as a part of their routine. The approach towards clients is wholly without a sign of interest. A consultant is indifferent, unwilling and arrogant towards a client. Consequently, it builds a huge gap in the cooperation, insufficient trust and non-fulfilment of the advice goals. **Devaluation** as one of the violations on the side of a consultant is described by Lemon (In Pribuľa – Paľa, 2006, p. 37 – 38), who suggests *that "the most common devaluation acts are: not responding to a greeting, ignoring, passive listening and disengagement, indiscretion and insensitivity, ruthlessness, insulting and unnecessary criticism, violation of professional secrecy, official tone, underestimating, contempt, sarcasm, irony, preferring individuals when in team, embarrassing a client, questioning the abilities and common sense of a client, hypocrisy, slander, verbal attacks and deception, stereotypes and clichés, speaking for others, postponing the problem solving"*. Levická et al. (2007) further defines a **dual relationship** as one of the inappropriate elements of the cooperation. She describes it as an established relationship of a social consultant with a client that has no relevance to the process of help. It results in conflicts between a professional obligation and other relationships in which a social consultant and a client are mutually joined.

The experience of social advisors with the violations of the boundaries in an advice process is presented as an outcome of the research focused on the violations of the boundaries and the relationship between a social consultant and a client in the course of an advice process. As it is an interpersonal activity based on a partner and professional-personal relationship between a consultant and a client, we believe that in this relationship the same laws are applied as in other interpersonal relationships. These laws, boundaries as well as violations of a relationship are being dealt with by various experts in the field. In the research we have carried out we have focused on how these boundaries and their violations, and the violations of a relationship as such are perceived by consultants and what their practical experience is.

The experience of social consultants with the violations of the boundaries in an advice process has been the topic of the research. Social consultants working in different social spheres have participated in the qualitative research. We have made an intentional choice with the following criteria: providing social advice.

The participants have been 4 women at the age of 30 – 40, with the university degree in social work / social advice, with minimum 3-year practice in the field.

To collect the empirical data we have used a semi-structured interview with an audio record, followed by transcription, coding, sorting, analysis, synthesis, generalization and others. The data provided by the participants were processed via the enshrined theory of Glaser and Strauss (In Gavora, 2007).

We have examined the impact of the violations of boundaries in the relationship a consultant – a client on the work performance of a consultant when the boundaries are violated on the side of a client. What we find interesting is the answer of participant 1, who has stated that "the cooperation cannot go on in a normal, common way and is usually, if a client does not change, finished". The answer suggests that an advice process only depends on a client and on their attitude and if a client does not change, the cooperation ends; that is why we consider this approach demotivating and not very professional.

Participant 2 sees the violation of the boundaries by a client as an opportunity to change the attitude, suggesting that *"the violation of the boundaries by a client always forces me to analyze the relationship with a client, I see it as a signal that I as a consultant have done something wrong in the advice process or that some rules should be applied individually"*.

According participant 3 *"it is an unpleasant situation which definitely needs to be solved. The clients usually do not realize that"*.

Participant 4 has stated that *"it certainly makes the work and repeated communication harder, it is a so-called stagnation of an advice process or a lack of concentration"*.

For consultants, the violation of the boundaries by a client is certainly a negative phenomenon, making the cooperation more complicated, however, on the other side, it can be a feedback for a consultant to look for new ways of communication and cooperation.

In relation to this, we have asked the consultants **when they begin to perceive the consulting relationship as negative, requiring a change.** Participant 1 feels it as negative *"when a consultant shows a kind of unfriendly attitude, especially when they cannot handle the client's behaviour, this calls for a change"*.

According to participant 2 it is *"when a client feels a strong need to verbalize their difficulties but has a minimum or no motivation to change. If this is a long-term situation, I vote for the end of an advice relationship"*.

The reaction of participant 3 was similar, *"when I feel that the process has no progress. When I feel continuous insecurity"*.

Participant 4 sees it similarly, *"when we see no results of the cooperation, when a client does not cooperate or when they have excessive demands and violate the boundaries, or when they attack us verbally, when they do not want to cooperate. It is also when there is foreclosure of the boundaries, client's disinterest, apathy and there is no positive shift towards solving of the problem"*.

The consultants agreed that they mainly perceive as negative when the advice process does not progress, change, and when there is no motivation and interest of a client.

In case nothing changes and an advice process is not efficient, we have been interested in **what can be expected if the violation of the boundaries does not change into an optimum relationship**. Participant 1 has clearly emphasized *"ending the process and shifting the client to another consultant"*.

According to participant 2, *"if the violation of the boundaries does not change into an optimum state, then it is optimum to avoid the conflict with a client and manage the end of an advice relationship"*.

Participant 3 has suggested *"probably ending the advice process and definitely the dissatisfaction of both, a consultant and a client"*.

Similarly, participant 4 has stated *"the failure of the advice process, which actually does not lead to solving the client's problem. Definitely ending the cooperation or shifting the client to the colleague"*.

The consultants see the absence of change and positive direction of an advice process as the reason to end the cooperation, respectively to shift the client to the colleague.

By this research we have also aimed at finding out **how this violates their further cooperation with a client**. Participant 1 has said that *"it is not possible to work with someone who does not want to perceive relationships as good"*.

Participant 2 has stated that *"the situation when the violation of the boundaries cannot be optimized is rather rare, usually when clients are addicted to alcohol or psychotropic substances or when they have personality*

disorders where not respecting of the boundaries is connected to the overall pathology of the client's personality and where the violation of the boundaries is rather expected".

According to participant 3, *"it is visible when a client feels insecurity or invasion of their comfort, that is how a client usually reacts, and then it is hard to move forward"*.

Participant 4 has said that *"any further cooperation is zero. The cooperation is at the freezing point, stuck or it ends"*.

It is essential that a client is willing to cooperate, is motivated enough and is determined to work on themselves and on solving their problem to realize where the problem is, what he did wrong, what is necessary to change in order not to disturb the advice process any longer.

The fact that the violations of boundaries have certain impact on the advice process and its running influences the work of a consultant to some extent as well. That is why it was interesting for the research to find **out how the violation of the boundaries in the relationship reflects in the work of a consultant**. Participant 1 has stated that *"a consultant certainly needs some supervision soon to be able to assess the client's situation objectively and to help them not to deepen those violations. A consultant also needs some self-reflection"*.

Participant 2 has said that *"eventually it will not help a client if the cooperation with them is difficult. It is more of a feedback for a consultant"*.

According to participant 3, *"there is some kind of uncertainty which prevents an advice process from moving forward, it is necessary to work on improving the situation"*.

Participant 4 has said that *"a consultant cannot carry out their profession appropriately unless they can identify what is suitable and right for their client, which usually brings an advice process to an end. A consultant may either fully merge with the client or does a lot of things for the client, there is tension and excessive burden"*.

The consequences of the violations of boundaries on the work of a consultant should not affect their attitude towards a client. A consultant as a professional is also expected to manage certain possible negative phenomena in an advice process, and, at the same time, they must be aware of their competences and what is anticipated from them.

Regarding this, the participants have been asked **when and how they feel that a client expects more from them than from their own effort**. Participant 1 has replied that *"when a client is passive, is not self-confident, follows my instructions, or, alternatively, is not interested in the cooperation but stays in the process; when they do not want to or do not know how to solve the problem or when their behaviour reflects excessive expectations"*.

Participant 2 has stated that *"when a client tends to avoid specific solutions that have been agreed on with a consultant before, when they verbalize their long-term inability to solve the problem with the aim to beg a consultant to do it instead"*.

According to participant 3, it is *"when there is a continuing resistance of a client to take responsibility and work on themselves mainly on their own, which often brings insecurity, disappointment or many times even anger"*.

Participant 4 has said that *"when a client leaves the solution on a consultant, when they are not independent"*.

As the experience of the consultants suggests, clients tend to expect more from their consultants than from their own effort. They do not contribute to the advice relationship with independence, motivation and desire to work on themselves, they have exaggerated expectations which results in the state when they are not moving anywhere.

Based on the information obtained from the consultants, we can conclude that the violation of boundaries has a negative impact on a consulting relationship where an advice process is at risk and the cooperation between a consultant and a client may get complicated.

Consultants see a consulting relationship as negative when there is insufficient motivation of a client to cooperate and the boundaries are violated on the side of a client, or when an advice process is not moving in a positive direction. Very often, in case of not working on a change or elimination of the violations in a consulting relationship, the cooperation is ended, an advice process fails or a client is shifted to a colleague. According to the consultants, the consequences brought by the violation of the boundaries reflect in their work as a tension and uncertainty, and then some self-reflection or even supervision is essential. We believe that it is important from the very beginning of the cooperation that a consultant is aware of their competences and that

the main initiative in problem solving should lie on a client, who will be supervised by a consultant with their help to self-help.

SOLUTIONS TO ALREADY EXISTING VIOLATIONS OF AN ADVICE RELATIONSHIP BY CONSULTANTS IN A CONSULTING PROCESS

Another field of study was solving of already existing violations in the relationship between a client and a consultant. We have tried to find out **what is important to be done to eliminate the relationship violation**. Participant 1 has stated that *"self-reflection, supervision and the ability to diagnose a problem are necessary"*.

According to participant 2, *"it is clear, open and fair communication with a client from the very first contact that is essential"*.

Participant 3 has stated that it is important *"to do as much as possible for the prevention from ethically unclear situations, to agree on the terms and ways of cooperation, to clarify expectations or the order of a client"*.

And according to participant 4, it is necessary to *"approach a client with an empathy, or, possibly, explain them when the boundaries of the relationship and the cooperation are getting beyond reasonable limits, we let a client to relax and try to find the best solution together. We carry out consultations or supervisions with colleagues or work on broadening of our own professional training, which encourages some steps leading to the mobilization and activity of a client"*.

It is easier to prevent the problems and violations of boundaries than to address their consequences, even though they cannot always be avoided. It is important to work constantly on the professionalism as those of a consultant and care for following the rules of cooperation.

Subsequently, we have asked the consultants a hypothetical question: **what is expected from them when solving already existing violations of the relationship**. Participant 1 has stated that *"their prompt detection, awareness of their existence and consequences, improving the situation to avoid negative impacts in further cooperation is expected"*.

According to participant 2, they are expected to *"analyze the situation, deduce some solutions and make a change either on their side or communicate the situation with a client. In such case some supervision might be of help"*.

Participant 3 has similarly said that it is necessary *"to bring the situation back to a common flawless course of an advice process as soon as possible and then cooperate with a client using a different method and try to avoid making the same mistakes"*.

According to participant 4, they are expected to *"maintain a professional approach and lead a client with help to self-help, show them how to solve their problems, or manage the client. They are also expected to be able to handle the situation and create a functioning professional relationship, to orientate and set new methods, and to restore the relationship again"*.

The consultants mostly agreed on the relevance of a prompt intervention and changes that are anticipated to direct an advice relationship towards an optimum level.

In the research we have also tried to find **out when, from the point of view of the consultants, clients begin to realize that the boundaries in the relationship have been violated**. Participant 1 has answered that it is "when a consultant makes it clear. If they have come unwillingly and have kept on destroying an advice process but then have changed their mind, it will be revealed then".

Participant 2 has said that it is *"when a consultant gives clients some feedback"*.

According to participant 3, it is *"when repeating the specification of an order and during a conversation with a client when we deal with it"*.

Participant 4 has stated that *"as soon as the communication begins to stagnate or when this is pointed out by a consultant themselves"*.

The answers make it clear that clients are very rarely aware of the fact that they are violating the boundaries and that prompt feedback from a consultant is essential to avoid deepening of the violations of the boundaries so that negative phenomena do not occur.

When having been asked **"How do you explain to a client that they are violating the boundaries?"**, the consultants have responded in the following way:

Participant 1 replied, *"I explain, demonstrate the consequences of their behaviour, and thus we avoid the creation of communication blocks"*.

Participant 2 has stated, *"I specifically identify subjects that do not belong to an advice process or those which I do not wish for because they violate our cooperation"*.

Participant 3 explains to a client through a dialogue *"the agreed terms of cooperation and there must also exist certain principles that will be respected by both sides"*.

And according to participant 4, *"some guidance is always appropriate. Through a dialogue I explain to a client that communication is the basis"*.

Open communication is the basis and it is a tool used to clearly explain to a client the situation and reality.

In this context, we have asked the consultants if **they have experienced the violation of the relationship on their side as consultants and what they have done next**. Participant 1 has stated that *"once due to the lack of sympathy for a client. I have shifted the client to my colleague"*.

Participant 2 has responded in a similar way, *"yes, through a dialogue with a client that my approach towards the client was not correct and in the course of cooperation we would do it differently"*.

We have received a similar reply from participant 3, *"yes, it has happened to me, but it is important to realize it in time and handle it to the advantage of a client within the work efficiency"*.

On the contrary, participant 4 has expressed the inability to *"judge it"*.

Based on the responds we can conclude that presence of the violations of the boundaries on the side of a consultant is also possible and quite common, but it is essential to realize that in time and avoid repeating it to be able to ensure the effectiveness of the cooperation.

At the end of the interview we have been interested in the way **the consultants would act in case the violation of the boundaries repeats again on their side as that of a consultant**. Participant 1 has said that *"definitely self-reflection, work on themselves, it is also necessary to create the ability to depersonalize and be objective and empathic towards subtle hints of a client, to educate and carry out some supervision, to practise the ability of diagnostics and to accept a client unconditionally, the way they are"*.

Likewise, participant 2 has stated that *"supervision, in my opinion, is the most suitable solution"*.

Participant 3 has, similarly, said *"to immediately carry out supervision, which I consider essential, if necessary, in consulting work"*.

Participant 4 has also stated that *"supervision is certainly appropriate"*.

The consultants have together agreed on supervision as a solution to the situation when the boundaries are being repeatedly violated on the side of consultants.

Based on the above stated views of the consultants we can conclude that the cooperation of a consultant with a client as well as the presence of violations can be already affected at the beginning of the work with a client by mutual defining of the rules and subsequent supervision of the cooperation in the way that a consultant and a client will be aware of their roles. In this context, the consultants state that for the elimination of the boundaries violation we need open communication with a client from the beginning of the cooperation, consultations with colleagues, and clarifying the expectations and terms of the cooperation. In case the violations already exist, it is essential to reveal them in time and bring the situation back to a common flawless course of an advice process as soon as possible, using other methods or an open dialogue with a client. Clients are usually unaware of the violations of the boundaries unless a consultant reminds them and they talk it over. However, everything depends on the type of a client. It is obvious that the formation of violations cannot always be avoided, consultants themselves are aware of this fact though.

Based on the research outcome and regarding the number of participants we cannot generalize the results for all consultants. The way the violations in the relationship occur depends on the situation, the type of a client as well as the attitude and professionalism of a consultant. However, based on the research outcome, we can suggest that consultants experience the violations of the boundaries quite often, which is subsequently solved by an open dialogue with a client. The experience of consultants with the violations of the boundaries in the relationship is a frequent phenomenon and at the same time a common part of an advice process and due to this a consultant should be prepared enough to manage such situations when boundaries and the relationship with a client are being violated.

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