PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE IN THE SOCIAL CARE SYSTEM IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

The current context of Romania in what concerns the social protection institutions is characterized by continual transformations aimed at improving and making more efficient service provision. This article has precisely as point of interest this process of change which, in our perspective, has as a starting point the investigation of the concetst of professional identity and performance. The study took place in Dâmboviţa County and the sample was selected from the employees of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection. The main objective of the article was to compare the two professions - social workers and psychologists, in the light of the interest shown in regards to professional identity and performance at work. The results confirmed the hypothesis of the research, which brings us closer to the aim pursued through this article - initiating steps in terms of institutional change.

KEYWORDS: *identity, professional identity, social care, performance.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *I 30, H 11.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is a studied concept which is also referred to in different contexts and by numerous disciplines, such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, but the same cannot be said about professional identity. Studying this concept has been a challenge for various reasons such as the quantitative perspective that was used, the nature and context in which we performed the analysis – the social care system. This challenge was caused mainly by the fact that social care in Romania is characterized by traditionalism rigidity and conservatism.

Professional identity could be analyzed using two perspectives, the first refers to the economic aspects, mainly paid work, and the second to a symbolic and social perspective, which derives from the uniqueness of each individual, but also, from its membership to a particular group.

"*Professional identity is a concept consisting of a combination of identities that shape the roles that individuals adopt*" (Bulei, Dinu, 2013) and how they behave in the organization. Professional identity is only a part of the whole personal identity that a person owns, but is one of crucial importance in terms of workplace activity. It does not refer necessary to the view that individuals have about themselves, but mainly to the conduct they have regarding the professional activity undergone.

At the beginning of the scientific approach we conducted a documentation process regarding the specificity of the chosen concepts: professional identity and organizational performance. Based on the literature consulted we created a database that allowed us to highlight the phenomena and

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processes addressed in a personal, concrete manner, maintaining at the same time a certain logic of the ideas.

Romanian literature on the subject is not as rich as was expected at the beginning of the research, there aren't many works that address this concept in a way to accommodate the characteristics of Romania's social care system in general and of the Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection, in particular. After studying the literature available we also noticed that the subject is appropriate to our socio-economic and political context. The field of our research is at the conceptual and methodological intersection of professional identity and organizational performance (Figure 1).
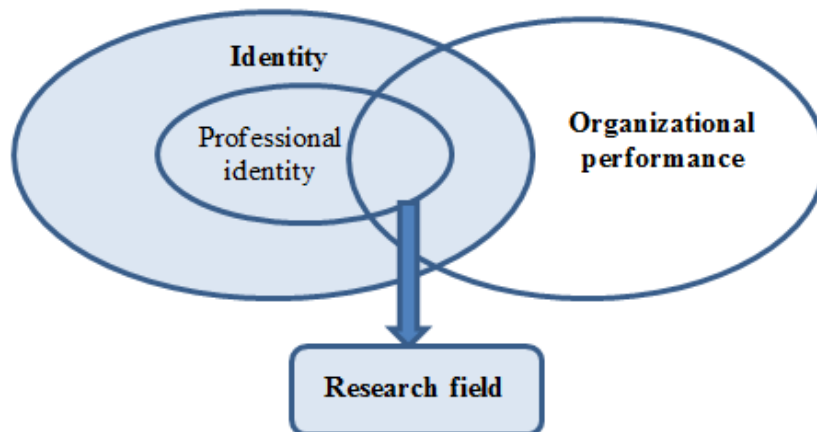

Figure 1. Research field
Source: the authors

2. PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY – KEY ASPECTS

The connection between individuals and the work they perform was discussed in various studies, most of them in social psychology and sociology (Riopel, 2006), mainly because in the workplace there are certain flows of complex interactions that can only be observed through instruments pertaining to social psychology and sociology.

Frequently, in day-to-day interaction, people tend to use their professional identity to present themselves and thus, the individual begins to notice similarities and differences, to make connections and to understand the social role that professional aspects involve (Popescu, Bulei, 2013).

Professional identity begins to develop and grow whenever a person becomes interested in a particular field or subject. The timing varies depending mainly on the evolution and development process specific to each individual's experience. In this context we can use the example of teenagers that become interested in a particular area early on building a model to follow in the future.

Professional identity has a very important role in shaping the roles that individuals adopt and how they behave when they perform a certain activity. Professional identity is only an area of the whole personal identity that a person has, but is one of crucial importance, mainly because of the economic reasons.

Having an identity related to the professional life requires a certain interpretative system that facilitates the processes of scanning and analyzing information. Through these systems people are choosing guides and are trying to manage their actions through appropriate ways of dealing with different situations and contexts.

Collective beliefs about identity must be taken into consideration since a single event can become an issue that members feel as being a threat to the unity of self and that needs an immediate reaction (Lerpold, Ravasi, Rekom, Guillaume 2007).

However, professional identity implies and includes identifying the discipline which an individual has chosen to follow. Professional identity is "*that state that allows members of a certain profession to recognize each other and to promote their characteristics externally. This process will require double work towards unifying internal and external recognition*" (Ion, 1990).

In conclusion, it is important to underline the fact that "*a fundamental dimension of the professional identity of the individual is, in fact, the sense of belonging and recognition in an institution/ organization*" (Fray, Picouleau, 2010), and the latter is responsible, to some extent, for the future and the possible implications for the professional identity of its employees.

3. PERFORMANCE IN SOCIAL CARE

In science, the connotations vary by discipline. For example psychology, social sciences and management use different definitions, depending on the scope of their analysis, that is why performance has multiple meanings, but through this paper we intend to identify specific issues characterizing the social care system.

Considering Dubnick's (2005) observations, we can state that performance refers to a type of intentional behavior, which may occur an individual or organizational level. In the context of our discussion regarding performance as deliberate action, it is appropriate to mention a classification of the perspectives on performance. The two dimensions presented in the table below (Table 1) reflects the importance that the prospect has in terms of quality of performance, helping - at the same time - to organize the literature in the field.

The first perspective focuses on the performance regarding the tasks carried out by a specific actor (P1). The performance includes all actions taken, actions that do not necessarily involve their successful completion. This conceptualization is relatively neutral, but highly prevalent. Another dimension tied to the concept of performance contains a judgment. The performance can be big or small. In the case when performance relates more to the quality of actions and less to the quality of the results, performance is conceptualized as a competence or capacity (P2) (Dubnick, 2005).

Also, when performance refers to the quality of results and less to the quality of actions, performance can be equal to the results (P3). The capacity of the organization does not represent the interest of these conceptualizations, in this context not only results matter as these results can simultaneously be outputs and effects observed in the public sector. Ultimately, when performance is carefully conceptualized, directed to both the quality of the action and the quality of the results, it can be considered as performance with sustainable results.

Performance refers to a productive organization, specifically to the organization that has the ability to perform and to transform this capability into results.

In Western societies, increasing the performance was a central point of interest in the public sector. Ingraham (2005) noted that "*for most of the twentieth century - and certainly in the last 25 years - the performance was a siren song for all countries*". The expansion of the postwar welfare state has increased expectations regarding the role of the state. In the 80s, however, this expansion has not been sustained (Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2011). Tax issues have put pressure on public budgets and legitimacy crisis has put pressure on the political-administrative system.

Governments of various countries have gone through periods of reform in the name of performance. Especially in the United Kingdom and the United States, this led to major reform and restrictive management measures (Dunleavy, 1986). Other countries followed different strategies and Politt & Bouckaert (2011) identified four strategies:

- privatization;
- marketization;
- modernization;
- maintenance.

The concept of performance is one that should underpin any activity in society. Thus, when two or more individuals cooperate in a task in order to meet their professional needs and interests that define, denote or measure to which extent this satisfaction is achieved, it is a compulsory reference regarding any decision and, naturally, for any scientific theory about society, seen as a suite of global interests. The notion of performance as the victim of a strange paradox: the idea must be felt in order to become as important as to be ignored.

Quite often, our reaction is semi-automatic, without even considering performance. In an organization, the interest should center on values, so as to meet the needs of individuals working in that organization. Innate or acquired values are the ones that nourish and motivate action at an organizational level, ultimately defining performance and efficiency of social systems.

In his article, Buchanan (1974) states that "*the foundations of a society are the values that are nothing but tools for managing human needs"*. The author does not consider the value system as being the one that establishes the world order, as do other authors, rather, he argues that these are things that we see through various methodologies and approaches used.

In this context, the author lists five aspects that any assessment of the performance of a social system must cover:

- Investigating efficiency;
- Investigating aims that reflect real human needs;
- Investigating goals that relate to different limitations;
- Methods that take into account political factors;
- Targets that do not limit innovative and creative possibilities.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research questions
Many studies dedicated to analyzing the phenomena of identity (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) in an organizational context have been conducted using mainly qualitative instruments (observation, case studies, interviews, etc.). On the other hand we have not found too many studies relating our two main points of interest: professional identity and performance.

The questions which we focused our study around had as a point of interest the key employees most frequently involved in interaction with vulnerable groups within the system of social protection and assistance for children and adults:

- Psychologists working in the Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection are more concerned with professional identity than their peers, the social workers?
- Is there a difference in terms of performance at work, depending on the occupation of the employee?

4.2. Research hypotheses
There are many issues facing psychologists and social workers who work in the public social system. While social workers are those who identify, manage and monitor cases assigned and assist in identifying appropriate methods of intervention, psychologists address the emotional-affective and relational mental health. The American Psychological Association specifies that "*psychologists are positioned to contribute significantly to decision making*" (Piechowski, Drogin, 2010) in the field of social care, also through the information and expertise they acquire, they can shed light on key issues, so crucial in the domain of social assistance. It has been observed that, in recent years, psychologists are extremely concerned with issues related to their career development, sensing the fact that a continuous training improves performance on the job (Ford, 2004).

Our research aims to investigate, in the first phase, professional identity (dependent variable) comparing the population of psychologists to the one of social workers (independent variable).

Hypothesis 1: We anticipate that the score for professional identity is higher for psychologists.

The second hypothesis aims to assess whether the level of performance at work (dependent variable) varies by occupation (independent variable).

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant statistical difference regarding perceived performance of social workers, compared to psychologists.

4.3. Research design

In our research we used a non-experimental, transversal, inter-subject design with the purpose of highlighting the differences in intensity of the dependent variable compared to the values of the independent variable.

The comparison subject group is built using subjective variables and given the fact that the sample volume was quite small, the conditions of applying parametric tests were not met that is why we chose to compare the two independent samples, using Mann- Whitney U test.

4.4. Instruments used in collecting data

For the purpose of our study, subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire composed of three parts, each part investigating issues relevant to our study: professional identity - measured through 20 items, which were subsequently grouped in order to create a score for each participant; performance at work– measured through 18 items and the last part created in order to provide some socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

In the last section the participants were asked to complete data regarding their occupation, professional experience in the field and gender. In our research, the results for all three sections will be considered relevant.

It is important to mention that we did not find relevant data regarding the instruments we used for our study as the questionnaire was created based on the study of the curent literature in the field (Garet, M., 2001).

4.5. Defining the reference population

Our research is a preliminary one and it wants to analyze several aspects regarding professional identity and performane in the social care system in Dâmboviţa County.

The sampling base consists of the total number of employees having the profession of social worker and psychologist from all departments, services and offices of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection in Dâmboviţa County. The research was applied on 63 subjects having the occupations mentioned before.

4.6. Sampling and estimating the volume of the sample

The selection of the sample was made randomly from the investigated category using a database provided by the institution. Subjects identified were asked to participate in the study, without any exclusion criteria, except their occupation.

Taking into account both the data provided by the Department of Human Resources, and the statistics compiled by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption the sample volume estimated for this study, given the total number of social workers or psychologists (approximately 110) and the time of the research (July 2015) was composed of 63 people, including 34 social workers and 29 psychologists.

Considering the two hypotheses of our research and analyzing the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, we identified sources of variability: history of interaction with beneficiaries, predisposition to stress, personality traits, and severity of cases specialists come in contact with, socio-economic status, qualification and the presence of labor conflicts.

4.7. Data analysis

For the purpose of analyzing the data collected SPSS 22 software was used. As it can be observed in the table below, the values for the two factors and the socio-demographic items were analyzed

separately for the two professions. In what concerns professional development, we noticed that the mean score obtained by social workers (12,7) was smaller than the mean score obtained by psychologists (14,67).

The situation is reversed when we take into consideration the mean scores for the factor performance: psychologists obtain a mean score of 21,4, compared with the score obtained by social workers 24,2.

Table 1 – Values of statistical indicators for the sample

Occupation			Professional identity	Performance	Work experience	Gender
Social worker	N	Valid	34	34	34	34
		Missing	0	0	0	0
	Mean		12,70	24,20	9,82	1,87
	Median		12,00	24,00	8,00	2,00
	Mode		12	24	8	2
	Std. Deviation		1,745	3,579	7,191	,346
	Variance		3,045	12,786	51,709	,120
	Range		7	16	27	1
Psychologist	N	Valid	29	29	29	29
		Missing	0	0	0	0
	Mean		14,67	21,40	9,83	2,00
	Median		15,00	21,00	10,00	2,00
	Mode		13[a]	20[a]	2[a]	2
	Std. Deviation		1,647	5,691	6,187	,000
	Variance		2,713	32,386	38,282	,000
	Range		5	28	23	0

Source: the authors

There were three items that investigated socio-demographic aspects: work experience, gender and occupation. As was stated previously, in what concerns occupation, more than half of the respondents were social workers. The data has a different distribution in what concerns the gender of the respondents, 92,1% being women and only 7,9% male. This reflects upon the main observations of a study conducted by SERA Association in 2012, were, at a national level, over 80% of all employees working in General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection were women, indicating o lack of attractiveness for men in what concerns social care activities, but also a deficient recruitment and selection policy in respects to actively promoting the equality of chance principle.

Table 2 – Frequency of values for gender and occupation

	Occupation		Gender	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Valid social worker	34	54	5	7,9
psychologist	29	46	58	92,1
Total	63	100,0	63	100,0

Source: the authors

Data analyzed for the item work experience revealed the fact that the range is vast 1-28 years of experience. It is interesting to notice that 61,7% of employees have ten or less years of experince in the field and only 5 % have 20 or more years of experience.

4.8. Results

In order to test our two hypotheses we used the Mann-Whitney U test, as all the conditions regarding a nonparametric test were met.

In order to establish a result in our research the null hypotheses were created, as follows:
- H0 1: The concern for professional identity is the same for both occupations.
- H0 2: There is not a significant statistically difference regarding perceived performance of social workers compared to psychologists.

Note that the mean scores for the two factors were different across the two professional groups, but we intended to see if this difference of value was due to chance or not.

After applying the nonparametric test, at a 5% significance level, the results were conclusive, the two null hypotheses were rejected and the alternative hypotheses were accepted.

5. CONCLUSIONS

After we performed the statistical procedures required on the data collected from the participants at the study we can conclude that professional identity and performance are factors that characterize in a different manner psychologists and social workers.

The objective of this paper was attained as it is of grave importance to understand the aspects that differentiate two separate but at the same time complementary professions. We raise a question in what concerns the innovation of human resources management, in a context where the needs and expectations of employees have changed, bringing about change at an organizational level as well.

This study has further implications, both for the professionals working in the social care system, but also for the public administration, as a whole, as it represents only a first step in addressing the "issue" of quality in the social care system.

The concept of professional identity results from a process of training that includes gathering all acquisitions and engaging them in a certain process. Both professional categories - psychologists and social workers - are vocational ones and the individuals that currently work within the welfare systems have to become aware of the body on knowledge, skills, professional competences and ethics required in following such a career. For both categories, competencies, skills and knowledge are contributing to the creation and delimitation of professional identity, thus helping also improving performance.

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