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HOW SOCIAL EDUCATORS MANAGE CONFICTS OF VALUES

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Abstract: This article sets out the results of a research study into how social educators deal with the conflicts of values they experience in their professional practice. We begin by describing the main characteristics of the social educator's activity, and go on to present the data, of note among which is the fact that value conflicts or dilemmas arising in professional practice tend to be addressed as if they were a private matter. Finally, we propose a number of alternative approaches by means of which this process of conflict resolution could be undertaken more openly with a view to ensuring greater well-being for professional staff and fairer decision-making for clients.

Keywords: *Professional ethics, management of value conflicts, moral competence, moral dilemma.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents a research study of the ways in which the social education professionals address their conflicts of value. This is a profession with a high degree of evaluative activity by its very nature, as will be made clear below.

Talking about professional ethics entails defining an ideal, in constructing the constitutive moral essence or ethos of the profession (Wanjiru, 1995: 36). This establishes and makes concrete the way in which the type

of relations that a particular group wishes to maintain with society is understood, the way of bestowing meaning on a practice and providing the reference in terms of which the conflicts arising in the group's day-to-day activities can be addressed. Secondly, and especially in the socio-educational professions, it also requires that workers possess some measure of sensitivity and moral conscience and awareness of the meaning they wish to give to their professional activity. Both of these elements – the essential principles and the ideal professional attitude – will be specifically outlined in a foundational document such as a code of ethics.

However, given the complexity of the scenarios in which social educators work, it is not enough merely to have essential moral principles of an aspirational nature or to have an especially well-developed moral conscience.

As regards the former, it is vitally important to have core principles, but they will be of use only if there is a strong connection between these principles and the realities in which people carry out their professional activity. Their day-to-day practice requires more concrete and more effective criteria for managing potential value conflicts. As has been noted by Hortal (2002: 101), "without the contexts, cases and circumstances that make them concrete, principles tend to be empty, just as contexts, cases and circumstances without principles tend to be blind".

With regard to the latter, possessing a moral conscience is no guarantee that the principles that define it are really put into practice in a person's day-to-day professional activity. What matters is the extent to which the worker is capable of incorporating his/her ethical position into the range of different situations in his/her everyday activity, and especially those involving a value conflict. The ethical domain is contextual, which means that professional training needs to facilitate fluid transition between principles and the concrete interventions undertaken in specific situations (Cortina, 2003: 26; Hortal, 2003: 100; Sáez, 2011: 33; Vilar, 2013). In addition, it is also a question of having the emotional and technical skills and aptitudes for the specific concrete management of a particular value conflict.

A first research exercise conducted in 2009 made it clear that in the socio-educational professions (social education and social work) there is no clear and explicit structure that would connect the ideal dimension to everyday reality, and that this has a direct impact on how conflicts of value are addressed. The research consisted of an interview with 29 people, chosen at random, who were asked a series of questions grouped in four major blocks:

1. Describe a conflict of value, and indicate which elements come into conflict and how this affects your professional practice.
2. Describe what was asked of you in this situation, what you felt responsible for and what alternatives were presented.
3. Explain the procedure that was followed in making the decision.
4. Explain what training in ethics you have had and what training you would like to have.

The method followed was not systematic, nor was the sample statistically significant, but even so, this research showed that people who work in the social education professions faced many difficulties in addressing questions of evaluation of their practice. We saw too that everything that has to do with ethics was seen as remote from their daily lives, and that this produced a clear lack of connection between ideal principles, moral sensitivity and how to act in a particular conflict. In other words, it would seem that the absence of conflict-management strategies and skills can generate a significant disjunction between ideals and practices, between thought and action. The worker and/or his/her team feel alone and overwhelmed, with the result that what is intended and what is actually done end up being very different things. In other words, as Kohlberg pointed out (1989), what should be done from a postconventional, principle-based perspective of universal justice is one thing, and what is supposed to be done from a conventional perspective of binding rules and inflexible laws is quite another thing; and, finally, what it suits us to do from a preconventional perspective centered on obtaining some benefit or avoiding a problem is quite another thing.

This absence of structures stems from an initial misunderstanding: there is always an individual and subjective experience of conflict, but the fact that this subjective experience exists does not mean that it needs to be addressed as if it were a private matter. On the contrary, as an issue engendered in a professional context, it should be engaged on the basis of collective public parameters. In so far as this is a situation that is generated in a public context (the profession), we believe there must be a collective public structure from which to address it in the fairest and most objective manner possible. In our research, we found that in a very large number of cases the resolution of conflicts came down to an individual reflection of a private nature based on personal experience, with very little structured support for decision-making (Vilar, 2013; Vilar, Riberas, Rosa, 2014).

In light of this evidence, we proposed to undertake further systematic research in order to explore in greater depth how professionals manage their conflicts of value. The aim of this article is to set out the characteristics of the research and offer a first approximation to the results we obtained.

The thesis we are seeking to defend is that any profession, as a form of public activity, needs to be equipped with structures to support the collective management of ethical conflicts that arise in the course of its exercise. We shall attempt to show that, far from this being present practice, in most cases the ethical conflicts that occur in social education are addressed as if they were a personal problem, and as such their management is confined to the private sphere. This leads to situations in which the worker is subjected to a great deal of pressure, which can result in stress; at the same time, this approach to decision-making can be unfair to the individuals affected.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, a brief outline of what social education is, with an emphasis on its highly political nature and thus on the importance of the ethical dimension in its day-to-day practice. This is followed by a description of the research carried out and the most significant data that have emerged from it in relation to the forms of managing conflicts of value. Finally the paper suggests lines of work for establishing mechanisms of a professional and therefore public nature to facilitate structured and well-founded decision-making that is fair to the client and a source of satisfaction for the worker who has to make it.

1.1. THE POLITICAL AND ETHICAL DIMENSION OF SOCIAL EDUCATION

Social education is a relatively new profession in the Spanish state. While forms of socio-educational activity are readily identifiable in a wealth of pedagogical experiences throughout the twentieth century, it was only in 1991 that social education gained formal recognition as a profession and as a university degree course. Its purpose is social integration through the creation of conditions to ensure that people are able to exercise their rights to the full, and although it aims to serve the population as a whole, in practice it works primarily with groups and individuals who are vulnerable and at risk. What distinguishes this profession from others that also work with vulnerable or at-risk people (such as social work) is its educational and pedagogical character. The understand-

ing is that the process of social inclusion entails socio-educational actions designed to develop the core skills and competencies that underpin social life (sociability and prosocial behaviour) and the acquisition of the cultural knowledge needed to take one's place in society (knowledge related to socially accepted ways of living in a plural and open society). This work is carried out not only with people in situations of vulnerability but also with the wider society in which they are to take their place, given that the idea of a just society necessarily implies collective actions of community building. Specifically, the Asociación Estatal de Educadores/as Sociales[1], Spain's State Association of Social Educators, defines the idea in its publication *Documentos profesionalizadores* [Documents of Professionalization] in the following terms (ASEDES, 2007: 12):

> "The right of every citizen as embodied in the recognition of a profession of a pedagogical character, the generator of educational contexts and mediating and formative actions that lie within the professional competence of the social educator and enable: the incorporation of the subject of education into the diversity of social networks, understood as the development of sociability and social circulation; and cultural and social promotion, understood as openness and access to new possibilities for the acquisition of cultural assets liable to expand a person's prospects with regard to education, work, leisure and social participation."

In the few years of its existence, social education in this country has made a significant effort to equip itself with instruments of reference that strengthen its identity (Vilar, 2011: 376 & ff.; 2013: 77 & ff.). The principal text associated with this process is the book *Documentos profesionalizadores* (ASEDES, 2007), which establishes the common framework of the profession. This must be seen as an essential document in so far as it determines a shared set of minimum criteria in a profession that, by virtue of its complex and diverse origins, draws on a number of theoretical and ideological premises and approaches. Specifically, the book comprises three texts: the first puts forward a definition of social education; the second sets out the ethical code of the profession, and the third describes the professional skills and functions of the social educator.

These documents were composed through a process of participation involving social educators affiliated to their respective professional bodies in Spain's various autonomous communities. The fact that social education is often required to engage with the adverse consequences of an unjust,

uncertain and changing world has meant that moral issues have been and are an omnipresent central element in the construction and definition of its professional identity. To cite Ronda, "the moral principles of the profession and the structures for putting these into practice are fundamental in providing a point of reference amid so much uncertainty" (Ronda; 2011: 62).

A characteristic feature of this profession, in addition to the educational and pedagogical dimension noted above, is that it tends to have a markedly critical political orientation towards those aspects of society that generate the situations of vulnerability, poverty, deprivation and lack of opportunities suffered by the individuals and groups with whom it works. Although social education is defined as a profession for all citizens, a large part of its *raison d'être* is the existence of injustice and the effects that this produces. The profession embraces as a priority the need to work with people who are excluded or deprived, or who live in fragile social structures that render them especially vulnerable and may easily place them in situations of risk.

We can readily agree with Caride (2002: 121) that social education is a political action, in that it must of necessity be carried out "in, with, by and for society". As the same author also tells us, "the professionals and the various institutional and social actors that take part in an educational action are not neutral, and neither are the ideological and epistemological grounds on which they are founded or the ways in which departments are organized and implemented" (Caride, 2009: 45). Political premises and policies rest on values and principles of an ethical nature, and, this being so, we regard that moral dimension as being especially present in this profession.

It is worth noting that the beginnings of the profession were characterized by a deep ideological sense with a high degree of political involvement, although the technical procedures were limited. Over time, this process was reversed, but now that the technical procedures have improved significantly it is appropriate to recover the ethical and political dimension that has been diluted in the apparent objectivity of the protocols, an aspect not without risk. Núnez (2003: 118) insists on the idea that the uncritical professional may become a social operator in the service of technopower, that is, instruments of a form of social control disguised as preventive actions. As Aguayo noted (following Weber), these actions can take many forms (Aguayo, 2006: 74): the power to maintain tradition (*traditional legitimacy*); the power that accrues from charisma and personality (*charismatic legitimacy*); the power that comes from the administra-

tive role of applying and using norms that must be obeyed by the client (*legal-rational legitimacy*).

Thus, it may happen that the professional, perhaps unwittingly, may have become an agent of social control in the exercise of their work and increasingly further removed from the ideal of transformation that first led them to engage in such work. Without intending to, he or she can end up being another cog in the machinery of segregation. We must not lose sight of the evaluative horizon of the profession because, as Úcar reminds us (2006: 262), "the utopian ideal or the goal of social change orients the interventions of the militant, while the administrative ideal guides that of the civil servant".

This makes it necessary to speak explicitly once again of the extent to which commitment, involvement and values are the elements that guide the task of social education, in order to counterbalance the growing bureaucratization of professional practice, a process that is also in its way the expression of a particular set of values. In addition, it is also necessary to talk about the kind of skills that the professional should have in order to address conflicts in their professional practice with a certain method. This is a matter of not confusing technification, which has to do with the use of the most precise and reliable strategies possible in order to make interventions fairer, more efficient and more effective, with technocratization, in which there is a mystification of protocol and procedure, endowing these with value in themselves and neglecting their purpose. The members of the social education profession are aware of this risk and have therefore once again opened up a rigorous debate that goes beyond a simple reaffirming of the ideals of the activity to take a self-critical and technical look at the processes involved in the management of conflicts of value. In short, the profession has come to understand that ethics is present in every aspect of its daily activities and that it must continue with the task of identifying the key considerations for its development and implementation (Vilar, Riberas, Rosa, 2015).

2. METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED

The research we have carried out, the initial data from which we are now presenting, was conducted during 2014. The sample consisted of 217 professionals with an average of 10 years experience in working in social educational resources, distributed as follows: 102 social educators,

54 social workers and 61 representatives of other professions, who were working in the same teams as the social educators and social workers.

We have limited the present study to the data relating to the group of social educators, theirs being a profession for which there has been virtually no research into the management of conflicts of value. That said, the data we have obtained are very similar to those for professional social workers, so that the conclusions set out here may be useful for both groups.[2]

In particular, we posited a qualitative research exercise. The study data were obtained from a questionnaire consisting of 7 closed questions (gender, age, professional qualifications, years of experience, area and nature of professional activity and age range of clients) and 7 open questions (description of the conflict, description of the alternatives available and the consequences of these, what they felt responsible for, how they resolved the conflict, what help they had in doing this, usefulness of their training in professional ethics for resolving the conflict, and perceived needs in the matter of training in professional ethics).

In this instance we were concerned not with the ultimate outcome but with the process of decision-making.

The table below gives the data for the principal characteristics of the professionals corresponding to the closed questions. As this was not a compulsory question, the number of responses (N) in each case is not always equivalent to the 102 social educators in the sample:

Table 1. Principal characteristics of the professional

Sex	**N**	**%**
Male	31	31.6
Female	67	68.4
Age		
Not over 32	23	59.0
33 to 45	14	35.9
Over 45	2	5.1
Experience		
Less than 5 years	12	16.4
From 5 to 10 years	39	53.4
More than 10 years	22	30.1

(Continue)

Table 1. Principal characteristics of the professional *(cont.)*

Job description	N	%
Team co-oordination	18	22.0
Solely direct work with clients	55	67.1
Age of clients		
Children and young people (0 to 25)	52	54.7
Adults (25 to 70)	19	20.0
Seniors (over 70)	14	14.7
All ages	10	10.5
Area of work		
Vulnerable children and young people (reception centre/ residential unit/leisure)	34	35.8
Social services/primary care	7	8.4
Mental health	16	16.8
Social care/Addiction	11	11.6
Functional diversity (disability)	5	5.3
Access to work/continuing education/adult education	8	8.4
Juvenile justice system/prisons	5	5.3
International cooperation	2	2.1
Attention to women (reception homes, support facilities)	3	3.2
Other	2	2.2

The open questions were processed and analyzed using qualitative methodology based on the coding techniques available in the ATLAS.ti programme, with two objectives: firstly, to simplify the information and obtain categories that would enable the discourse of the participants to be described and grouped, and secondly, to structure the data in order for it to be analyzed quantitatively using the SPSS programme.

Given that these are open questions, the responses constitute a more or less structured narrative of a conflict experience that brought to light the difficulty in identifying a conflict of value as distinct from any type of other professional conflict. The study also revealed the scant awareness of the management systems or strategies that had been followed.

Although the questionnaire addressed in depth both what generates conflict (the sources of moral conflict) and how it is treated (forms of conflict management), the data we present here refer only to the latter. We will address all that relates to the sources of conflict in a subsequent and more comprehensive analysis.

Categories for organizing the information

The qualitative analysis of the information was used to construct a system of categories with which to identify the main ways in which conflicts of value are managed.

Regarding the reliability of the categories, these have been validated in a subsequent study of "ethical conflicts of treatment professionals in Catalan prisons" (we are currently in the process of writing the final report). In this study, a closed questionnaire was drawn up, with the questions corresponding to each of the categories. The application of Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) gave a score of 0.808 (there is considered to be internal consistency with a score of 0.7 above).

Specifically, the classification we present consists of three broad categories, each divided into two subcategories:

Categories	Subcategories
No management	Inhibition
	Imperative instruction
Personal management	Personal/private management
	Personal/public management
Public management	Semi-structured public management
	Structured public management

Figure 1: Structure of the categories.

First, the category "No management" denotes a way of responding to a situation in which the professional avoids or is inhibited from taking a decision or addressing the value conflict they experience. The conflict exists but is sidestepped and the professional becomes resigned to accepting the status quo, whether from fatalism or from pragmatism. There can be two complementary situations here, which we have defined as subcategories:

- *Inhibition*. In this case, professionals sidestep the value conflict, acting as if it did not exist, as if they had not perceived it; they repress the sense of contradiction the situation engenders in them and effectively ignore their inner feelings. Their conduct conforms to obedience and a refusal to question ways of doing things with which they disagree but which they do not resist or challenge in any way.
- *Imperative instruction from a superior*: In this case, the professional does not make decisions but complies with the instructions determined by a superior as appropriate to that particular situation. It may be that the professional has asked for guidance or that in expressing their doubts, they are given instruction from above. In either of these two alternatives, the prevailing course of action is compliance of an explicit order.

  Second, the category "Personal management" refers to the handling of a conflict of values of a professional nature, which from our point of view should be treated as public, as if it were a personal conflict and, as such, to be handled privately. As in the previous category, here too we have defined two subcategories.
- *Personal/private management*. In this case, the professional feels that there is no one in their workplace with whom they can share their concerns, and accordingly confines all of their reflections and discussions to their private sphere. They consult friends and family, examine their feelings, clarify their views and values and ultimately make a decision that will be determined by the degree of risk they are able to take. They may also talk to external supervisors or consult technical documents, but always from the isolated position of a subjective experience. Whatever the decision may be, the important thing in this case is the confusion through which the subjective nature of the experience of conflict results in that conflict being seen as purely personal and private.
- *Personal/public management*. In this case, the professional consults one or more people in their workplace, but only those with whom they have a relationship of friendship. In this case, professionals insist that they only confide their concerns to people they trust, and acknowledge that they would not overtly discuss an experience of conflict with other members of their team. What is foremost here is precisely the personal connection rather than the fact of being in a professional context, and that is why we consider this subcategory within the overall category of private management. This form

of management is deceptive in that the fact of its taking place in the professional context leads some people to believe they can address conflicts of value in their workplace, whereas in fact they are engaging in a private form of conflict management.

Third, the category of "Public management" applies to the existence of more or less explicit structures of conflict management in the workplace. Here once again we have defined two subcategories:

- *Semi-structured public management*. In this case, the professional teams and/or departments are aware of the need to address explicitly and publicly the conflicts of values that arise in professional practice. However, they do not have specific structures or a method of deliberation for such situations, and conflicts of values are discussed at regular team meetings. Counselling and advice from some external expert may be available at times, but in most cases the implicit experience of the team is the sole resource. The conscientious handling of conflicts adds to the implicit experience of the team members, but in the absence of a systematic method of deliberation and a proper record of decisions taken, this knowledge is fragile and can be lost as members of the team leave and are replaced.
- *Structured public management*. Finally, we have defined a scenario in which the teams as well as being aware of the desirability of dealing with conflicts of value in the public context in which they are produced, create systematized structures for doing this. This entails providing specific advisory bodies, structured spaces of deliberation, protocols for the making and subsequent recording of decisions, and systems for following up and evaluating those decisions. In addition, there will be reference material to orient the treatment of particular thematic contents: legal framework, ethical codes, guides to values and technical recommendations, in addition to the experience of the team, which in this case will be explicit and available for consultation.

3. RESULTS

The data we obtained are set out below. As can be seen in the graph, 21.6% of professionals repress a response or comply with an imperative

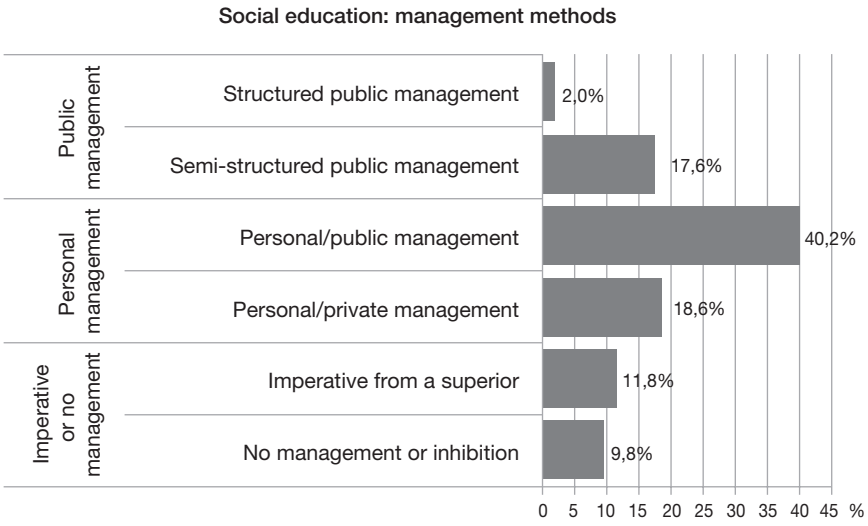

Figure 2: Percentages for different forms of conflict management.

instruction. 58.8% of the sample practice a form of personal management, while only 19.6% report public management. In other words, 80.4% of professionals do not have a structured system of support for decision-making.

A more detailed analysis of the subcategories will give us a clearer picture of the features of professional social educators' decision-making.

- 1st category: Public management (19.6%)

STRUCTURED PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

2% of respondents to the questionnaire explicitly stated that their team had protocols, a structured space for deliberation and access to external support in the form of supervision, and a system with which they record the conclusions reached, helping to construct clear and explicit references that can be used on subsequent occasions. They consider that this management system should be in widespread use because it provides a space of emotional protection for the team members, who feel they have others' support in making decisions. Although the primary aim will often be the resolution of a particular conflict rather than the maintenance of a permanent

space that facilitates reflection on the moral dimensions of the professional activity, this systematization normalizes the presence of ethics in the work environment and permeates day-to-day practice with a reflective spirit.

SEMI-STRUCTURED PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

17.6% of professionals work in teams that are aware of the need to address the management of conflicts of value in an explicit and collective manner. As in the previous case, the team becomes the framework and the protection, but the handling of conflicts is approached from common sense, experience, intuition, vocation or sensitivity rather from the use of a structured system of conflict management. Often it is primarily a question of solidarity and a good working atmosphere. In these cases, the perception of the team is highly subjective in that it does not use external benchmarks, although there may be a document or protocol that gives some measure of guidance and subsequently serves as a record.

- 2nd category: Personal management (58.8%)

PERSONAL/PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

In the remaining 40.2% of respondents inside institutions there is a prevalence of consultation with members of the team, albeit in a more informal way, and only with those with whom there is a good relationship or some affective bond. In these cases it is very clear that the communication is similar to what would take place in relation to a personal-private dilemma, and often neither the management nor the decision that was taken is recorded in any form. What we are looking at here are friendly discussions or chats, which may well help to clarify the situation but will not necessarily serve to objectify it, because their main purpose is to provide support.

PERSONAL/PRIVATE MANAGEMENT

Within the bounds of clearly personal, private experience, 18.6% of professionals talk about conflicts of value generated in their work situation

with people to whom they are emotionally close, and who are not fellow professionals but completely outside the work context (friends, family, etc). It is also common for professionals not to talk about such conflicts with anyone, opting instead to manage conflict from the isolation of their personal subjectivity. This can cause a great deal of stress, and these professionals report that they derive benefit from activities that help them think or get rid of stress (sports, walking, relaxation activities ...).

- 3rd category: Imperative or no management (21.6%)

IMPERATIVE FROM A SUPERIOR

11.8% of professionals choose not to deal with a conflict but to wait for instruction from a direct superior. This is frequently the case in institutions with a very hierarchical organizational structure in which the professional has very limited margin for manoeuvre in the making of decisions and tends to prefer not to risk the consequences of confronting authority, to avoid taking responsibility for any decision and to faithfully follow the course of action indicated by a superior.

NO MANAGEMENT OR INHIBITION

Finally, 9.8% say they will do everything possible to avoid conflict and prefer simply to do nothing. These professionals justify their attitude in clearly pragmatic terms ("it's not my problem", "it's not up to me", "it wouldn't do any good for me to get involved", etc). Their responses often mask a significant sense of powerlessness in relation to the situation and their need to protect themselves from the suffering caused by the experience of crisis or contradiction.

4. DISCUSSION

The results we are presenting here indicate that a structured, public and collective system of decision-making is found only in a small minority of teams, and that an intuitive, private and individual approach to the managing of conflicts of value is very clearly dominant. We consider this situation to be detrimental to both the professional and the client.

It is detrimental to the professional because the relational dimension, the recognition of the vulnerable other and the ethically committed perspective open the door to the realm of the emotions. As Román reminds us (2001: 27), "responsibility also includes, in addition to the rational, objective and ethical dimension, a sentimental aspect: we know we are responsible for something but we feel responsible for someone". The fact of having a moral consciousness but not having strategies and mechanisms for conflict management, together with isolation and the powerful emotional charge present in decision-making puts [the professional] in a situation of high moral stress. That is to say, there is an increase in *moral hazard* (Banks, 1997: 34) when the worker experiences a level of stress and pressure that is often well above that which corresponds to their professional level, with a resulting deterioration in their *moral health* (Guisán 1986: 47), which can lead to burnout. In this light it is necessary to consider the ethical and emotional tensions to which working from these virtues can give rise.

It is detrimental to the client because, firstly, the decision depends on the subjectivity of the professional who addresses the conflict and their capacity to manage the pressure to which this subjects them, so that the responses to a given situation within the same resource can vary considerably depending on which member of the team is involved. If, in addition, the situation is one of emotional stress, there is an increased risk that the professional may prioritize the need to get out of the situation and fail to think it through from objective rational criteria centred on what would be best for the client. A scenario of this kind may leave the client defenceless, breaching essential principles such as equality or, more generally, social justice.

In other words, these are situations in which professionals are subjected to a great deal of pressure by the need to take a decision and to formulate a response. Lower stress levels and greater objectivity in decision-making are determined by the factors noted below:

- The subjective perspective, moral sense and experience of the professional.
- The type of support structures for deliberation available to them when evaluating alternatives and making decisions.
- The quantity, quality and variety of reference materials offering orientation on the thematic content of the situation that creates conflict.

THE SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE

The dominance of an individualistic, actuational and applicationist professional culture in the socio-educational professions has hampered a proper understanding of the public and collective nature of the profession. We are referring to an individualistic style of professional culture that attaches great value to personal experience and personal judgement, to the detriment of collectively constructed knowledge. In many cases the tendency to think in terms of personal/individual patterns persists, as if the issues in question were private. Obviously, personal styles must be respected, but this should not lead to personal projects. In fact, although reference is constantly made to collaborative teamwork, the reality is that this is generally eroded to the point of disappearing, and it is considered natural that an ethical conflict should be resolved by the person experiencing it. It is clear that a remarkable amount of weight still attaches to an applicationist, actuational professional tradition of a technocratic cast, inspired by technical rationality, in which individual work based on personal intuition and experience takes precedence over reflective research-based strategies typical of critical scientific rationality (Riberas, Vilar, Mora, 2013: 22-27). The latter would be more suitable for complex contexts and situations, as in the case of conflicts of values and moral dilemmas.

THE TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT STRUCTURE

It follows from the above that if the primarily individual character of professional practice and the management of conflicts from subjective criteria are considered normal, even natural, it is understandable that the profession should have concerned itself with defining aspirational criteria in the form of a code of ethics while neglecting the construction of collective structures of conflict management.

From our point of view, it is important to bear in mind that the profession is exercised simultaneously at four levels (Vilar, 2013: 156): the first and broadest of these is the professional body, and at this level the objective to be pursued is awareness of the profession (know what profession one belongs to). At the second level, the profession is always exercised in a specific setting with specific problems, and the goal here is to develop a sense of specialist expertise and to construct the knowledge to attain

this. Third, the profession is always exercised in a particular institution and in a particular local area; the aim here is to be aware of the team. The second and third levels include a perspective of interprofessionalism because both from the local area and from the institution or department, the activity always involves the participation of other professionals. Here it is essential to embrace the ideas of systemic complexity and cooperative work, which are the foundation of a true networking. Finally, exercise of the profession is always to some extent a personal and private experience, but it is essential to avoid the mistake of regarding professional practice as a purely personal activity. The point is that it is necessary to build a structure, a mechanism of reference capable of providing at each of the levels described above a space for and a method of deliberation.

THE QUANTITY, QUALITY AND VARIETY OF REFERENCE MATERIALS

Tying in to the previous point, each of these spaces of deliberation ought to generate output in the form of thematic contents that can serve as an aid to evaluation on subsequent occasions. How the deliberations are carried out is as important as the conclusions reached. Our proposal is that each of the four levels described above should generate reference materials: the code of ethics corresponds to the first level, good practice guides and technical issues to the second, profiles of the experience acquired by teams in real-life situations to the third, and personal awareness in conflict situations to the fourth. Essentially, it is a question of having access to the moral understanding that makes it possible to foresee conflict, thus lessening the surprise factor and the resulting stress, and, where stress cannot be avoided, to provide conscious, explicit experiential baggage that really contributes to the management of the new situation.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

Far from being an incidental, symbolic aspect of the training of social educators, ethics and the moral dimension of professional activity should be a central pillar of training, in view of their presence in so many everyday situations in professional practice.

There is a vital need to articulate a discourse that connects principles to realities at the point where tensions manifest themselves as conflict.

Further, we must provide social educators with the technical tools for managing conflicts of value. The point here is to understand that addressing conflict situations or dilemmas calls for a whole repertoire of skills and abilities that go beyond the purely ethical: self-control, prevision, the capacity for reasoned argument or the analysis of consequences, for example, are elements of the skillset that should enter into play in addressing a conflict of value. It is a matter, then, of providing procedure-based training on how to handle such situations. This means incorporating emotional intelligence and emotional skills, because people's feelings and emotions are a significant part of any ethical conflict, and are precisely what renders a previously established rational argument inadequate: what engenders doubts about the rightness of a rational approach is the emotional dimension that challenges the dictates of reason.

In this regard we suggest that ethics should be a cornerstone in the training of social educators, with systematic work on the moral issues attaching to the profession. However, it is not simply a matter of seeing what portion of the training curriculum should be dedicated to the ethical aspects of professional practice but of appreciating that ethics permeates every part of the training process in its entirety. To do this we must start with a broad and multifaceted view of the ethical dimension that includes at least three perspectives (Vilar, Riberas, Rosa, 2014: 134):

- Ethics as a philosophical formation that develops the public responsibility and the moral sense of professional activity.
- Ethics as a technical capability that requires rigour, technical efficiency and effectiveness: in other words, a sense of responsibility in practice.
- Ethics as a strategic capacity that makes it possible to manage stressful situations such as the resolution of moral conflicts or dilemmas.

Addressing a conflict of value calls for the harmonious coexistence of these three perspectives. Firstly, having the theoretical framework to be clear about what a conflict of value is and what moral bearings to use in adopting a position in relation to it. Secondly, having the necessary technical knowledge to minimize the emergence of conflict through a rigorous professional intervention that is not reliant on improvisation. Thirdly, having a method that makes it possible to develop structured processes of deliberation for decision-making and a space in which to do so.

In addition to this skills training, the creation of this support structure, which will include the various levels of action (profession, field, institution and personal consciousness) and the provision of reference guides derived from each of these levels, will facilitate the structured knowledge that is essential to the strength and solidity of the profession and, in turn, contribute to the resolution of conflicts. Finally, the provision of external structures that can give objective support to teams and professionals in decision-making is highly recommendable. These structures may take the form of a interprofessional ethics committee, where the case in question is referred for consultation outside of the team, or of supervision within the team provided by external social educators who have specialized in the management of conflicts of value.

An alternative that is beginning to be developed is the creation of spaces of ethical reflection in social intervention services (ERESS), as an initiative promoted by the Comité d'Ètica dels Serveis Socials de Catalunya, the Catalan Social Services Ethics Committee (Departament de Benestar i Família, 2011, 2014).

In addition to the proposal mentioned above, it is worth noting other proposals in Catalonia such as the initiative of the Institut Borja de Bioética with the portal "bioética & debat" (bioethics & debate); the line of ethics consultancy of the Ethos chair at the Universitat Ramon Llull and the proposals of the Observatori d'Ètica of the Fundació Campus Arnau Escala at the Universitat de Girona.

However, it should be noted that not only does participation in these spaces require a basic training in ethical issues that, as a general rule, the professionals we are concerned with here do not have, as can be seen from the data of this research, but also that such participation is voluntary: thus, despite being of unquestionable value, it does not ensure that all the teams working in social resources will have normalized either the presence of ethical reflection in their day-to-day practices or the capacity for the public management of conflicts of value. While the presence of such committees is a regular and normal part of the profession in the various fields of social health care, in the case of the social education professions this dimension has yet to be constructed or is little more than incipient. It is worth remembering that our research data show that barely 2% of professionals say they have access to or participate in systematic resources for managing conflicts of value, while some 17% have a collective but unsystematic approach. This indicates the gulf that still exists between what would be desirable and what is actually the case in social education.

From our point of view, the lack of spaces for reflection in such professions is conditioned firstly by the level of professionalization of social education and secondly, and closely related to the above, by the degree of technification of its processes.

With regard to the first factor, social education (and by extension the socio-educational professions) has a relatively low level of professionalization, one that is also and above all very recent. Initial activity in this area was essentially framed from a perspective of care or control, and in this ideological framework the approach to service provision was simple and without complexities: care or punish. The gradual process of professionalization has led to a concern with the ethical commitment to society and, in turn, to the embracing of theoretical and ideological models based on the promotion of people's rights, so that consideration for the other is essential, has come to the fore and will condition the premises that have served to define professional practice up until now.

With regard to the second factor, closely linked to the first, the lack of professionalization is accompanied by very elementary processes of technification, so that the tendency to work on the basis of common sense does not generate much in the way of moral questioning. However, progress towards more complex theoretical systems, the appearance of intervention structures of a technical-scientific nature and the consequent technocratization of processes are causing moral reflection on the use of these methods in relation to people's rights to become a major concern.

To sum up: the existence today of solid initiatives to promote systematic reflection on ethical issues in social education is good news, but we cannot ignore the fact that these are minority proposals that affect only a very small percentage of the profession as a whole.

We therefore consider it is essential to understand that the promotion of ethics in the profession must entail a comprehensive plan involving the universities, the public authorities, the employers and the professional associations. It is a matter of fostering a structural change in the way in which professional activity is understood.

We must devote our best efforts to all of this, for the sake of public responsibility, political coherence and the future of the profession.

NOTES

1. The Spanish association made up of the various professional associations of the different autonomous regions. In 2007, this association

became the Consejo General de Colegios de Educadoras y Educadoras sociales, the General Council of Associations of Educators and Social Educators (CGCEES), which defines the strategic lines along which the profession is structured.

2. We have also consulted studies of social work professionals carried out by Ballestero (2009) and Ballestero, Úriz and Viscarret (2012), which have been helpful in providing additional references, although we have chosen a model of analysis and a system of categories different from those used in their work, which are surely mutually complementary.

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