

AGATA CELIŃSKA-MISZCZUK

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

Institute of Psychology

## CLIENT WELFARE AND THE CLIENT. WHAT AND WHETHER TO DEFINE?

The article “Client Welfare in Psychologists’ Ethics Codes” provokes reflection on changes in the way psychologists understand human welfare and on the significance of this fact. The aim of this comment is to point to the potential risk involved in attempting to define client welfare unambiguously. The essence of the comment – assuming, after the Code of Professional Ethics for the Psychologist currently in effect in Poland, that the paramount value in the work of a psychologist (including one who will introduce additions to the current codification) is the other person’s welfare – is the reflection on whether it will not be more important for the welfare of the recipient of psychological services that psychologists (the “providers” of these services) focus on determining the nature of the “subject” of this welfare accurately rather than precisely define the concept of welfare.

**Keywords:** psychologist’s professional ethics, human welfare, recipient welfare, client welfare, professional ethics codes.

I have read Katarzyna Sikora’s article with great interest. It is valuable and important – particularly with reference to the current state of the law concerning the psychologist’s profession in Poland as well as current debates on the significance of ethical aspects in the education of psychologists (cf. e.g., Brzeziński, 2011) and on the necessity of supplementing the current *Code of Professional Ethics for the Psychologist* (PTP, 1992). Dr Sikora’s analysis of the way of approaching the client welfare norm in professional ethics codes for psychologists leads her to the conclusion that the norm is not formulated with sufficient preci-

sion. This provokes the question of the risk involved in attempting to precisely define the welfare of the recipient of services provided by the psychologist and the question of possible responses to the lack of a precise definition of client welfare in professional ethics codes for psychologists.

#### TO DEFINE?

Is it not the case that attempts at unambiguously defining client welfare involve the risk of its subjectivization and reductionist or even erroneous understanding? The Author herself points to such a danger, stressing the diversity of forms that psychologists' work takes and (which I believe to be more important) the variety of theoretical paradigms of psychology itself. The various words used with reference to welfare (*benefit, welfare, well-being*) suggest that psychologists define it in terms of "benefits and well-being." As the Author rightly observes, attempting to make welfare concrete by referring to the achievements of contemporary psychology makes it impossible to formulate the meaning of these concepts unambiguously (cf. Trzebińska, 2008, pp. 39-56).

The risk of defining client welfare inappropriately while attempting to define it precisely may also be due to cultural differences not only among psychologists but also among the recipients of their services. The question arises: who (how many people and what kind of people) is to be the reliable authority prescribing a particular way of understanding welfare rather than a different one? The Author notices this fact, referring to studies that are of importance to the issue and have provoked discussion within the community (cf. Fisher, 2004; Knapp & Vandecreek, 2007; Pomerantz, 2013).

The last of the (many possible) arguments supporting the view that the specification of client welfare could be risky (if not harmful) refers to the specificity of practicing the profession of psychologist. Both the current Act on the Profession of Psychologist (Article 2) and the Code currently in effect (norm 13, PTP, 1992) stress the importance of the psychologist's autonomy in providing services. It therefore seems that it is precisely thanks to such aspirational formulation of the norm discussed that we are able to respond in a way that is adequate to the norm. This would not be possible if we were to be mere "technicians" realizing the objectives set by the client or the norm-giver. The formulation of a definition of welfare by psychologists for the purpose of creating a universal code may therefore lead to what can be called "code ethics" of "ready-made formulas imposing external and impersonal patterns of behavior" (cf. Ślipko, 2005, p. 24).

In the light of the above brief comment, it is valuable that, at the very beginning of her article, Katarzyna Sikora points out that psychologists refer to philosophical theories. However, as the Author emphasizes, referring to the concepts of good proposed by philosophers not only happens seldom but may not provide a solution to the problem given “the variety of concepts of good in ethics.” A review of the stances of modern and contemporary philosophy on the concept of good indicates that attempts at unambiguous philosophical understanding of good lead to its erroneous or reductionistic understanding. In this context, philosophers argue that good should not be understood unambiguously but analogically – in terms of “the universal quality of beings” (Sajdek, 2001, p. 626). The source of each standard should be the experience of its corresponding value (Niemic, 1998).

#### WHAT TO DEFINE / DETERMINE?

Commenting on the above remarks, we may conclude by asking: Should the community of psychologists above all undertake reflection on a precise definition of “client welfare” – thereby running the risk of formulating “its own system of values”? Or should reflection on the nature of the subject of this welfare come first? According to the current Code (PTP, 1992), the paramount value in the psychologist's work is “the welfare of the other person.” In most countries, the question of “client welfare” is (according to Katarzyna Sikora's analysis), the question of the welfare of the person – the human being. It is, consequently, the question of what the psychologist recognizes the nature of the human being to be. Depending on this, client welfare may be considered only in terms of the ability to adapt to different life conditions (“the ability to survive”) or from the viewpoint of capability for development, including the development of capabilities unique to the human being (cf. Uchnast, 1998).

During an interdisciplinary symposium devoted to the issues of the norm in psychology, one of the ethicists participating in the discussion pointed out that – in keeping with the preamble, which determines the interpretation of all the norms in this document (cf. Lewandowski, 1996) – the client welfare norm should be interpreted not only as “resolving life problems, improving interpersonal contacts, and achieving a better quality of life, which is supposed to result from developing the individual capabilities,” but also in the broad sense of respecting the norms of natural law and fundamental humanist values, independent of outlook differences. With reference to the above, citing norm 25 of CPEP, he

stated: “these words . . . set high ethical requirements, connected with the responsibility for determining the nature of the human being and recognizing the fundamental values” (Niemiec, 1998, pp. 117, 119). Determining human nature appropriately is all the more important as, in providing his or her services, the psychologist does not primarily rely on legal or professional regulations but on his or her professional and personal competence as well as (which is important in this profession) on the confidence of the recipient of psychological services – on one person placing trust in the other person.

#### REFERENCES

- Brzeziński, J. (2011). Jakiej psychologii (i psychologów) potrzebuje społeczeństwo? *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 14(2), 7-33.
- Fisher, C. B. (2004). Challenges in constructing a cross-national ethics code for psychologists. *European Psychologist*, 9(4), 273-277.
- Knapp, S. & VandeCreek, L. (2007). When values of different cultures conflict: Ethical decision making in a multicultural context. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 38(6), 660-666.
- Lewandowski, S. (1996). Kontrowersje wokół preambuł. *Studia Iuridica*, 31, 87-95.
- Niemiec, H. (1998). Norma psychologiczna w etyce zawodu psychologa. In Z. Uchnast (ed.), *Norma psychologiczna. Perspektywy spojrzeń* (pp. 113-122). Lublin: TN KUL.
- PTP, Polish Psychological Association (1992). *Kodeks Etyczno-Zawodowy Psychologa*. Warsaw: Polish Psychological Association.
- Pomerantz, A. M. (2013). How big is the competent community? And who gets in? *American Psychologist*, 68, 478-479.
- Sajdek, P. (2001). *Dobro. Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii* (vol. 2, pp. 609-628). Lublin: Polish Thomas Aquinas Association.
- Ślipko, T. (2005). *Zarys etyki szczegółowej* (vol. 1: *Etyka osobowa*). Cracow: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Trzebińska, E. (2008). *Psychologia pozytywna*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne.
- The Act of June 8, 2001, on the Profession of Psychologist and on Psychologists' Professional Self-Government* (Dz. U. [Journal of Laws] No. 73, item 763, as amended).
- Uchnast, Z. (Ed.) (1998). *Norma psychologiczna. Perspektywy spojrzeń*. Lublin: TN KUL.