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## IS IT POSSIBLE TO DEFINE THE “WELFARE” OF THE PSYCHOLOGIST’S CLIENT?

In this polemic response to Katarzyna Sikora, attention is drawn to the need to refine the term denoting the person or people that the psychologist works with, for it is inaccurate and misleading to subsume them all under the concept of “recipients.” In the section on “client welfare,” the view is presented that the proper subject of debate among psychologists should be those values involved in their profession that really make it possible to achieve “client welfare.” The impossibility of defining this concept as well as its evaluative character may imply the necessity to abandon using it in psychologists’ ethics codes.

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## WHOM DO WE CALL THE RECIPIENT OF THE PSYCHOLOGIST’S SERVICES?

In her text, Katarzyna Sikora analyzes professional psychologists’ codes of ethics in terms of the concept of the “welfare” of the recipients of their services. What raises doubts is her assumption that “recipient” is a more appropriate term for a person in a professional relationship with a psychologist than the one which is used in the literature of the subject and established in practice: “client.” The term “recipient” is much broader in scope, since it covers parties ordering psychological services (i.e., employers), e.g., institutions such as court, the management of a school or an industrial plant, parents, etc. Situations of conflict between the expectations and needs of the employers and those of the individuals

that psychologists directly work with are one of the most frequent ethical dilemmas in psychological diagnostic practice. It is also worth reflecting on who is the recipient of the scientific research carried out by psychologists; certainly not the participants in that research, and codes do contain recommendations concerning the ethical standards of conduct towards these people. I believe the discussion should begin with deciding whether the implementation of norms set out in codes of ethics for psychologists should be differentiated depending on the status of recipients of psychological services. The basic distinction is that between direct professional contact with a psychologist and commissioning a psychologist to perform a specific task. The former involves the psychologist's clients and the latter involves employers. In the Meta-Code of Ethics adopted in 2005, the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) defined the term "client." That term refers to any person or persons that the psychologist has a professional relationship with. An individual client may thus be a patient, a student, or a participant in scientific research, while a group client may be a married couple, a family, a school group, etc. The norm of caring for "client welfare" should therefore concern the people that the psychologist directly works with, not the employer. Unfortunately, the Polish Code of Professional Ethics for the Psychologist (PTP, 1992) confuses the two groups of service recipients; what is more, it suggests that ethical principles apply above all to the relationship with the employer, although they also apply to conduct towards people directly working with a psychologist. The psychologist's responsibility towards the employer can be related to a number of principles mentioned in ethics codes, such as professional competence, integrity, ethical sensitivity, or confidentiality (APA, 2010; BPS, 2006; EFPA, 2005). The distinction between client and employer is not clearly made in the above codes, and the possible areas of conflict that a psychologist may encounter in his or her work are not clearly identified there, either.

#### IS IT WORTH DEFINING "CLIENT WELFARE" IN CODES?

Analyzing various forms of psychologists' professional activity, it is necessary to reflect on the limitations and misunderstandings that result from making care for "client welfare" the chief principle. These limitations were aptly described by Graanan Gillon (1997) in his reflections on medical ethics. He points to three main limitations on care for "client welfare." The first one concerns showing respect for the autonomy of the person being helped and, above all,

finding out of what kind of help the client needs and wants. The second limitation concerns the costs that the client is able to bear, and particularly the temporary harm (suffering) that the professional's activity may cause to the client. Finally, the third limitation consists in taking into account the rights of third parties. In this case, Gillon's (1997) analysis concerns mainly social justice in the field of medical services, but it can also be applied to the consequences of the psychologist's activities, e.g., for the client's children. In my further reflections I shall focus on the first limitation. The principle of respecting the autonomy of clients, particularly important in various forms of psychological assistance including psychotherapy, allows to avoid the paternalistic attitude of imposing specific solutions "for the sake of the client's welfare" with a total sense of advantage over the client due to one's psychological knowledge. Respect for the client's autonomy manifests itself, above all, in obtaining consent to the forms of working together after providing the client with basic information necessary to make a decision. Respect for the client's autonomy and freedom is a precondition of taking into account the multiculturalism and diversity of recipients of psychological services.

This is because, when considering the utility of the concept of "client welfare" in the psychologist's professional work, it is necessary to answer the question of who is to define welfare in a specific psychologist–client relationship. There is a great temptation for a psychologist to do this, unknowingly drawing on the values recognized by himself or herself and thereby depriving the client of subjectivity and autonomy.

What is important in referring to "client welfare" is to stress that this norm cannot be approached in isolation from respect for the fundamental rights of every human being, particularly the right to autonomy, subjectivity, dignity, intimacy, and confidentiality.

These values found expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); they are also invoked in the Code of Professional Ethics for the Psychologist (PTP, 1992) and, as a result, they specify the framework in which we define "client welfare."

Invoking these values obliges the psychologist to determine the scope and aim of the service together with the client, which makes it possible to specify together what the welfare of a particular person in a specific life situation is.

Psychologist is a profession of public trust, which means that his or her professional activity follows ethical principles. Defining more precisely what a profession of public trust is, the decision of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal (Case no. K 41/05) refers to the concept of "individual's goods," specific in their

nature (e.g., life, health, freedom, dignity, good name), pointing out at the same time that they must not be violated in the course of providing professional services.

This kind of legal and professional protection of the recipients of professional services is perhaps another argument for no longer attempting to define the concept of “client welfare,” focusing more on the ways of realizing it in psychological practice in various areas of professional activity.

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